

chapter 1 – beginning of summer:

Harry lay flat on his back under the bright sunlight of the midsummer sun. Beside him he could hear a light breeze gently rustle through the flowerbeds that he was currently supposed to be weeding. He sighed when he was reminded of this task, and raised himself up onto his elbows to scan the windows of the house in front of him, making sure that his aunt and uncle had not yet arrived home from their shopping trip.

It was now three weeks into the summer holidays, and, unlike most teenagers who were celebrating their newfound freedom, Harry was willing the holidays to pass quickly so that he could return to school to see his friends. Harry, you see, was not an ordinary boy. He was a student at Hogwarts, a school that taught witchcraft and wizardry and in this world he was famous, known for defeating the dark wizard Voldemort when he was only a baby. He had only found out about this when he had received his first letter from Hogwarts on his eleventh birthday after his aunt and uncle had brought him up believing that his parents had been killed in a car accident when he was little. Since then he had met Voldemort another four times, and had somehow managed to escape death each time.

Harry sighed and closed his eyes. Even though he had survived these encounters, there were many people who hadn't. Since Voldemort's return the year before many people had been killed by Voldemort's hand, including Cedric Diggory, a student Harry had been competing against in the Triwizard tournament the year Voldemort returned, and only a month previously Sirius Black, Harry's godfather and nearest thing he had to a parent, had disappeared when Voldemort had attacked the ministry of magic.

"What have I ever done to deserve this?" Harry muttered to himself as he pulled himself up and walked over to where the hosepipe was gently sprinkling water over the flowers he had planted that morning. He picked up the hose and gently sprayed it over his body, dampening the t-shirt and cooling his sunburnt skin before he adjusted the angle of the arc of water to spray over a dry part of the flowerbed.

He sat down cross-legged on the grass and watched the water fall, adjusting the angle of the arc slightly until a rainbow appeared and he raised a hand to flick one of his wet bangs out of his face. The action revealed a lightning shaped scar on his forehead, a memento of his first defeat of the dark lord all those years ago. He sighed again, and absently rubbed the scar as he rested his head on his hand and his elbow on his knee, his other hand took up the hose and played with the arc of water, making it bounce and enjoying the sound of the water on the leaves.

He sat like this for a couple of minutes, relaxing with the rhythmic pattern of water hitting the leaves and thought about the prophecy that Harry's headmaster Dumbledore had revealed to him at the end of his fifth year at Hogwarts. He resisted the swell of fear inside of his chest as he recalled the part which stated that this battle would end with the death of Harry, or with Harry's defeat of the dark lord.

Part of him was angry about this prophecy. He had never been happy with the idea that someone could predict his fate and felt out of control whenever he thought about what could happen in the future. The other part of him had accepted the prophecy, and had become determined to do all it could to ensure that when he did come up against Voldemort again, he would be ready. That was one of the reasons he had happily agreed to help the Dursley's re-landscape their garden. All the digging, planting and earth shifting he had been doing over the past few weeks had already started to show in his once childish physique. The addition of a couple of inches on his height also gave an indication as to the changes that were occurring in his body and as the days passed Harry began to feel stronger both physically and magically.

As he sat and watched the water he let his mind fill with memories of Hogwarts and what he could remember of his parents and of his godfather. His mind filled with screams of Sirius's name, and the look of pain on Remus Lupin's face as he had tried to stop Harry from jumping through the veil after his godfather. He shook his head slightly, changing the image to the graveyard where Voldemort had returned the year before.

Kill the spare...

His face grimaced when he heard the inhuman voice hiss the words, and his eyes shut when memories of the green light flashing by him and look of the Cedric's face when he saw the boy hit the floor next to him, his eyes staring blankly in surprise and his handsome features quickly paling as life left the body.

Harry's breaths became shorter as other images of people being hurt by the dark lord entered his mind. Now the wizarding community had accepted the return of Voldemort, the dark lord had not bothered to hide himself any longer, and had started to "train-up" his death eaters with regular attacks on muggles and the weaker members of the wizarding world. Not a night went by without Harry being awoken by sharp pains in his scar when Voldemort was attacking and every news broadcast was filled with reports of more people going missing, or found tortured and dead. And now, thanks to the prophecy, Harry felt personally responsible for not being able to do anything about it.

He angrily swiped at his face, annoyed with himself for allowing tears to fall from his eyes. What was it Dumbledore had told him once? That it didn't pay to live in the past and forget about the present? Harry mentally shook himself, and rocked forward onto his knees so that he could stand up and go back to where he was supposed to be weeding. He had had a lot of support from his wizarding friends this holiday. Though this was partly due to the continuous presence of a wizard supplied by the Order of the Phoenix for his protection, a lot of it also had to do with the death of Sirius, and Dumbledore's orders to make sure that Harry wasn't left out of contact for over three days at a time.

"Hey, Harry."

Harry turned quickly to see Remus Lupin, once a professor at Hogwarts and part of his father's group of friends. He was dressed in his familiar shabby clothes and had his usual sickly look about him, though most of it was hidden by the wide smile on his face. After a quick calculation Harry realised that the full moon had just passed, meaning that Lupin had just been through the ordeal of being a werewolf once more.

“Long time no see.” Harry held out his hand to the man, but it was ignored as the man pulled him into a tight hug.

Harry laughed slightly. “It’s only been a fortnight, Remus.” He said, pulling away. “And its not like you haven’t heard from me.”

Remus nodded and laughed as well. “Only two weeks?” he asked. “It seems longer.” He stood back a little and looked at the rapidly growing lad in front of him. As well as the addition of height and muscles, Harry’s hair was finally beginning to grow out, now long enough to tie back in a stubby pony-tail with a few bangs that were still too short to reach falling forward into his face. “And haven’t you changed in those two weeks!”

Harry laughed again. “Its all the work I’ve been doing for the Dursley’s” he said, absently indicated the nearly finished garden.

Lupin frowned. “They aren’t forcing you to do this are they?” he asked. “You know what we said about them over working you...”

Harry shook his head. “I offered.” He assured the werewolf. “It needed to be done and if I’ve got to be stuck here I needed something to keep my mind off... things.”

Lupin nodded, understanding. “I haven’t stopped working, myself.” He said, his voice losing its happy edge. “Don’t dare to take the time to think.”

Harry gently placed his hand against Lupin’s arm. Sirius’ death had hit the people who knew him hard. He gulped slightly, resisting the urge to take his father’s friend in his arm and let spill about how guilty he felt, and how scared he was about the prophecy Dumbledore had told him about.

“So, to what do I owe the pleasure?” Harry asked, changing the subject.

Lupin fumbled in his robes slightly and pulled out a letter that Harry recognised as being one that he had written to his headmaster a couple of days before. He quickly remembered the question he had

asked about continuing his Occlumency lessons, hoping to prevent Voldemort's actions from invading his dreams and maybe to reduce the constant throbbing in his scar. Harry hadn't liked to admit it, but he was almost willing to face the wrath of his potion master again in order to stop the visions.

"You look tired." Lupin said quietly as Harry took the letter and ran his eyes over it. "Tonks was on duty last night, and reported that she could hear you screaming from your room in the early hours of the morning. Thinking you were being attacked she ran into the garden, but then saw you at the window."

Harry nodded. "Another of Voldemort's escapades." He muttered. "Leaning against the cold window helps sooth my scar sometimes."

Lupin nodded. "Dumbledore wants you to come back to Hogwarts with us. You- Know-Who is beginning to attack wizarding families as well, and he thinks that your visions, if that's what you want to call them, might get more vivid and lifelike. He wants to keep an eye on you."

Harry's eyes had lit up at the idea of going back to Hogwarts early, but fell when he heard of Dumbledore's reasons.

"More like he wants to know what's going on and where." He said but felt guilty as he said it, remembering that Dumbledore had admitted that he had cared about him and would never want to hurt him at the end of last term.

"What do you mean by that?" Lupin asked.

Harry shrugged. "Dumbledore's had me filling in a diary and sending him daily updates on these dreams. By identifying those that have been in my dreams he hopes to be able to have a slight advantage over Voldemort and get some of them back."

Lupin nodded. "So you're his source of information? I was wondering about that. But how do you know who they are?"

Harry shrugged. "Sometimes, especially with the magic folk, their names get spoken. Other times I can only describe them, and their surroundings. Hopefully picking up on something that can be used to find out who they are."

"So you can walk around in these dreams?" Lupin asked. "I thought that last year you saw everything through Voldemort's eyes?"

"Still happens, sometimes." Harry said, shuddering slightly. "They're the worst. I not only have to watch but also have to experience it. The last one I had was last night, which must've been what Tonks heard."

"What happened?" Lupin had slowly moved towards a bench that Harry had painted the weekend before, and now the two were sitting down in the shade of the large sycamore at the bottom of the garden. "Do you want to talk about it?"

Harry sighed and hung his head. "Voldemort attacked a wizarding family. A father, his wife and two daughters. I – he tied the father up and made him watch whilst he and the other death eaters...um..." he paused and glanced up to see the horror in Lupin's eyes and knew he didn't have to explain further.

"And you actually experience all of that? Feel all that he feels?" Lupin asked and Harry nodded.

"It scares me." Harry said. "Sometimes I actually believe it is me doing those things. It is so real." He looked over the garden in front of him. "Last night I could actually feel the rope binding the hands of the girl I was..." he shuddered again. "And I could feel her tears on the side of my neck as she cried."

"Harry, it wasn't you. Remember that." Lupin said and he put his arm over the boy's shoulder. "I'll let Dumbledore know what you are going through, and I'm sure you can work on your Occlumency so you can prevent it in the future. I think he was hoping that now You-Know-Who knows Dumbledore would never hurt you that he would leave you alone."

"But he hasn't." Harry said. "Though it isn't like before. Last year he was trying to get me to do things, to go to the ministry... but this year, it's almost as if he wants me to feel his presence all the time. I think he's trying to get me scared."

"Is he succeeding?"

Harry thought for a few moments before answering, then nodded. "But I don't think I'm scared in the way he planned. I'm not scared of him, just of what he is doing to others to get to me. I feel responsible for what they are going through, yet I know I can't do anything to help. The feeling of helplessness is what scares me the most." Remus nodded in understanding. "When am I going back?" Harry asked.

"Tonight." Lupin said. "Same sort of process as before. But heading for the station. Hogwarts is too far away to fly all the way on brooms and so we'll be travelling most of the way by the Hogwarts Express."

Harry nodded. "What time?"

"About midnight. The train leaves at half one, and we don't want you exposed more than necessary. Is that okay with you?"

Harry nodded, smiling slightly. "I'll look forward to it." he said. "What do I tell the Dursleys?"

"The truth. You are going back to school."

"And Hermione and Ron?"

Lupin hesitated. "They don't know anything about it yet." He admitted. "Arthur will be meeting us at the station though. He's been allowed to be more actively involved with the Order now that Fudge has admitted that You-Know-Who is back"

Harry thought back to the previous year when the Minister of Magic, Cornelius Fudge had denied all facts that suggested Voldemort had returned, even going as far as firing Dumbledore from Hogwarts school and making Harry look like a mad, hallucinating school boy.

Lupin looked at his watch. "I'd better go," he said. "I need to meet the others at the station. They are checking over the train at the moment and posting guards until tonight."

Harry frowned slightly. "Seems to me there are a lot of people going to be involved with this." He said. "Is it worth all the hassle?"

Lupin frowned. "Harry. Your safety is the most important thing. And yes, you are worth the hassle."

"Me? Or the boy-who-lived?"

Lupin froze. "I don't think I understand, Harry."

Harry sighed. "I've been getting so many owls this summer, fan mail I suppose you could call it. Loads of people apologising for doubting what I said, telling me that they'll follow me to the end. It seems to me a lot of people only like what I stand for rather than me for myself."

"I guess that could be the truth, Harry." Lupin admitted. "A lot of people do think that way. But there are those closest to you who know you for who you are. Ron and Hermione for instance. Not to mention myself, Dumbledore and your other friends and teachers at Hogwarts. We don't have any over ambitious expectations of you."

Harry smiled. "I appreciate that a lot." He said and Lupin stood up to go.

"I'll see you later tonight then." He said. "I suggest you go and pack soon, just in case we can convince the train to leave early or something."

Harry nodded and followed Lupin to the front gate. "Oh," Lupin said. "And I nearly forgot to give you this." He handed Harry a small box. "I meant to give it to you before you left, but had to get it on special order." He gave a small wink. "I suggest you open it indoors, just until you get used to it." then he turned around and headed off down the street, turning into a small alleyway between two houses before Harry heard the tell-tale pop of someone disappearing away.

Chapter 2 – Nighttime visitors.

Harry sat in his room watching the small golden ball fly around his room with a large smile on his face. His present from Remus Lupin had been a golden snitch; a gift whose origin had obviously come from the memories of his father Harry had stumbled across in his potion's professor's Pensieve. James Potter had been well known for carrying a snitch around with him, showing off his seeker skills by letting go of the ball and catching it again before it got too far. And Harry, though a good player himself having been the youngest seeker on a Quidditch team for a hundred years, now appreciated the concentration and skill needed to catch the snitch so quickly, especially after the small flying ball had just escaped his grasp for the ninth time that evening.

The Dursley's had arrived home late, and had taken Harry's news that he was leaving happily. They had been quite polite over the past few weeks, not yelling at him for being a waste of space like they used to, but not going as far as to treat him as part of the family. The compromise consisted of acknowledging each other at meal times and happily ignoring each other for the rest of the day. Now, Harry heard his Aunt Petunia calling up from the bottom of the stairs that dinner was ready and leapt up, snatching the whizzing snitch out of the air as he passed and putting it carefully back into its velvet presentation box before opening the bedroom door and heading down the stairs.

He silently settled himself at the table and smiled to himself as he reached for the jug of water in front of him.

"Why are you so happy boy?" Vernon Dursley demanded. "What games are you planning to play?"

"Nothing, uncle" Harry said, instantly removing the smile off his face and pouring himself a drink. "I'm just happy to be going back to Hogwarts this evening."

"Not as happy as we are, believe me." Vernon replied, piling potatoes onto his plate and passing the serving bowl onto his son, Dudley who was perched upon two of the kitchen chairs in order to support his

colossal weight. "You are quite welcome to stay at that freakish school of yours and keep your abnormalities there."

Harry nodded, and stood up slightly to place the jug back into the middle of the table.

"And maybe you could ask them to stay there all of next summer as well. There's no point in you coming back just to be leaving again a couple of days later. It spoils our plans for the summer."

"Yes Uncle Vern-" As Harry he leant forward, a sharp pain flashed across his forehead, and his hand dropped the jug to grip his scar as he fell against the table, showering his cousin with water and sending various plates onto the floor.

"What are you doing, boy?" Vernon yelled, standing up and grabbing at Harry's shirt to haul him back off the table. But Harry didn't feel his grip. The pain in his head was building, and his fear grew as he could see images of dark hooded figures apparating in the dark outside the house at the entrance Privet Drive. He groaned as he forced his way back to reality, and then pushed away from the table.

"We have to get out of here." He cried, struggling to get pass his uncle who still had hold of his collar.

"What are you talking about?"

"You have to let me go, we are in danger here." Harry proceeded to kick out at his uncle, panic rising in his chest as he struggled to get free.

"What are you going on about, boy? The only dangerous thing around here is you!"

"Vernon, I think you had better come look at this." Harry's Aunt Petunia's strangely detached tone made the others in the room stare at her.

Silence followed, suddenly broken by Harry as he managed to force himself from his uncle's distracted grip and run up the stairs. He ran

into his bedroom who's door flew open as he rounded the top of the stairs and slid along the wooden floor, reaching out underneath his bed to the loose floorboard that hid his wand.

Once he had the familiar length of wood in his hand, he stood up and started to turn back to the stairs when a flash of light and a loud explosion from outside attracted his attention. He slowly made his way back to his bedroom window; the pain in his forehead reducing itself to a dull ache as the panic inside him subsided and a strange sense of acceptance took over. Even though he knew he wasn't a fully trained wizard, he still felt comforted by the wand he held in his hand and was prepared for what he would see outside.

Twenty or so hooded figures stood around the front of the Dursley's drive. The explosion had been Vernon's expensive company car, and it now lay burning fiercely on the other side of the road. Harry gulped slightly, and looked around his room. "This is where we hope Dumbledore's protection charms really work." He muttered to himself. He glanced at his watch, and his stomach fell when he saw it was barely ten o' clock, hours before the order members were due to arrive.

"Where are you, Harry?"

Harry froze in the entrance to his bedroom, unable to move at the shock of hearing the familiar voice. He rubbed his hand against his scar; even though it was still aching the pain wasn't overwhelming him as it had during his dreams.

"I know you are in there, Potter, why don't you come out now and save yourself a lot of pain?"

"Harry?" Harry looked down the stairs at the pale faces of the Dursley's. "What's going on?"

Harry shook his head and set his jaw firmly. Whereas the broom that was waiting for him on his bed may have been a way for him to escape, he knew he couldn't leave his family here.

"I'm sorry," he told them, and there was a sharp flash as something hit the front door. His Aunt Petunia screamed and the three Dursleys ran back down the hallway to the living room, only to be shocked back into the hallway by the image of another hooded figure trying to break into the window there.

"Don't panic." Harry said from where he was peering at them through the banisters having made his way half way down the stairs. "This house is well protected, and I am sure help is on its way."

"What is going on?" Vernon demanded, his face going from pale and sickly to an angry red. "What have you done?"

Harry, sat himself on the stairs, his wand gripped tightly in his hand. He heard the continued attacks from outside the house and fixed his eyes firmly on the front door.

"I was born." He muttered.

Chapter 3: Into the night.

“Why can’t you get in?”

“I’m sorry my Lord, I guess Dumbledore has really outdone himself on trying to protect this boy. Nothing we can’t handle though.”

“I am surrounded by idiots.” He muttered to himself, and then Voldemort let his blood red eyes fall onto his follower. “If I wanted your opinion I would’ve asked for it.” he hissed. “If this wasn’t so important then I would make you pay now for what you have said.”

The death eater nodded slightly, and bowed as he walked away. “I shall see how the others are progressing around the back my lord.”

“Yes, you do that, Malfoy” Voldemort sneered.

“Potter!” he called to the house. “Come out Potter, there is no use hiding. It won’t help you. It will only prolong your death.”

The house stayed silent as the death eaters continued to force entry.

“Your parents can’t help you this time, Harry.” He called again. “It’s only a matter of time.”

Harry froze on the steps inside the house and nodded to himself. Voldemort was right; it was only a matter of time. He looked again at the Dursley’s cowering below him in the hallway. Why did these things always have to happen to him? It seems as if everywhere he went he was followed by death, by his friends falling around him. He felt a strange pressure building in his chest and he leant forward to help himself to breathe.

“Harry! Can you hear me Harry?”

His parents were dead. Then Cedric and Sirius. And soon the Dursleys. He looked at their fearful faces again and shook his head. No. It wasn’t that death followed him, it was Lord Voldemort that followed him, and it was he that caused all the death.

The pressure inside him grew with his realisation and he gripped the handrail and the wall to steady himself as dizziness hit.

"I can hear you, Tom," he shouted back.

A sudden silence followed, broken by Voldemort's evil laughter.

"So, you are in there then. I was beginning to worry that I had been led to the wrong house."

Harry heard a scream from outside, and the flash of green light through the hall window told him that one or more of his neighbours had just died.

"What do you want with me, Tom?" Harry called out.

Silence, followed by a twinge in Harry's scar. He frowned slightly; surely it would be hurting more by now. He put his hand up to it, and was surprised to see his finger tips covered in blood. The pressure built up in his chest even more, making it hard to breathe as he slowly made his way down the stairs until he was standing in the front of the door. He could see a silhouette from the street lamp on the other side, and his breath caught in his throat. Voldemort was standing barely three feet away from him, with nothing but a locked door in the way.

"I do not appreciate people calling me that, Potter." He heard the shadow say.

"Then why don't you just answer my question?" Harry asked, taking another step forward.

He heard his aunt gasp from behind him, and a sob emerged from his Aunt. The pain in his chest was becoming unbearable, and he could feel the air around him hum against his skin as the wand in his hand started glowing a bright red.

"I just want you, Potter" the dark lord practically spat his name out. "It seems as if Dumbledore has hidden the reasons why from you, the mudblood-loving fool."

Harry slid himself even closer to the door, staring at the tall figure on the other side.

"I know about the prophecy." Harry said. "And I've probably heard more of it than you ever will."

"I don't doubt that" Voldemort said quietly, sensing that the boy was close even though he couldn't see into the darkness of the hallway. "But there is more to it all than that one prophecy. Our fight has been predicted for centuries. And I don't think even Dumbledore knows how powerful a wizard you are, Harry. I can help you discover just how strong you can be, and if we can join together we can forget about all these silly prophecies and rule this world together, Harry."

Harry looked down at his hand where the wand was still glowing an angry red and burning into his skin. His nose crumpled with the smell of burning flesh and he dropped the wood to the floor. The air crackled around him and he heard a laugh from outside.

"See what I mean." Voldemort said. "Can you see what you are doing, Harry? You are growing up, my boy, and your magic is growing with you. I can help you control it. I can help you be strong."

"I'll never join you" Harry hissed, and suddenly the glass in front of him shattered, revealing the face of his enemy.

He heard screams from his relatives behind him and other crashes as the rest of the windows in the building fell from their frames. The building began to shake, and plaster began to fall from the walls.

Voldemort leaned forward a little, through the window frame of the door. "Isn't it amazing what a little fear can do, Potter?"

Harry clenched both his fists as the building began to shake all the more.

"Voldemort! Leave him alone."

The dark wizard spun to see the headmaster of Hogwarts standing in front of him, flanked on both sides by various representatives of the order. He smirked and turned around.

“You belong with me, Harry,” he said quietly. “I can show you what you are, what these people” he pointed back at the crowd behind him “have tried to hide from you all your life.

He reached through the broken glass and gently ran his hand down Harry’s face.

“Harry!” Remus Lupin jumped forward, his wand ready to curse the Dark Lord, but his attempts were destroyed as he was blasted back by a bright white light that enveloped number four Privet Drive and all the surrounding area.

Chapter 4: Destruction of the Dursley's.

The blast sent the Order members flying backwards, many hitting trees or fences before they fell to the floor. In the sudden silence that followed, Privet Drive stood still, and its visitors lay dazed and staring at the remains of what used to be the Dursley's house.

The silence was shattered by a howl-like cry and the stillness changed into one of high activity as Remus Lupin leapt to his feet, running towards where he had last seen the son of his old school friend.

"Harry!"

His advance was checked by a strong arm around his chest and he struggled briefly until his eyes connected with the pale blue gaze of the Hogwart's headmaster.

As soon as he had relaxed, Dumbledore's attention turned to the other members of the Order. "Kingsley, take your team and go round the back. See if there are any Death Eaters left there. Moody, get your team together and follow me. We have to see if there are any survivors in the house."

The chaos was immediately checked as the Order members followed the sharp orders issued by the tall, white bearded man. Dumbledore looked at Lupin who still had the headmaster's arm wrapped around his chest. "You can come and help the search with us." He said quietly, and then spun, making his way across the blackened lawn to the still smouldering wreck of number four, Privet Drive.

Lupin concentrated his search in the area where he had last seen Harry. The front door was surprisingly still standing, though the walls around it had fallen when the second floor had crashed to the ground. He climbed his way over the ruins, ignoring the shouts and conversations of the others as he started shifting some of the rubble that had collected behind the door.

A shout of excitement appeared from the middle of the house a couple of moments later, and he eagerly stumbled across the

remains to see Dumbledore and Tonks clearing away some debris from around a hole.

As Lupin looked down into the darkness, his happiness wavered slightly as he saw the three pale faces of Harry's relatives. They appeared to be in a perfectly round chamber, and seemed untouched by the rest of the house that had fallen around them. He lowered a hand down into the hole, offering some assistance to help them out but frowned when he connected with an invisible barrier.

"A protective ward." Dumbledore said, kneeling down by the werewolf and placing his own hand upon the resistance. "Harry must've created it before the house went up."

"Then he must've created one around himself." Lupin said, and jumped up, making his way once more to where the front door remained standing.

A couple more moments of searching, however, revealed no such chamber near the door. Tonks had joined him in his search and the two of them pushed aside the debris quickly, not caring about the cuts on their hands or the state of their torn and bloody finger nails as they tore at the bricks that resisted their efforts.

"Remus."

Lupin's head shot up at Tonk's small voice and looked down at the small area she had been clearing. His breath caught in his throat when he recognised the familiar length of wood that lay on the floor.

He reached out and gently took hold of it, quickly dropping the holly stick again when it burnt his hand.

"Albus!" Tonks had raised her head to call to the headmaster as he helped the Dursleys out of their protective chamber. The old man was there in seconds, one hand resting reassuringly on the back of Remus' shoulder as he looked down at the wand.

"It's Harry's" he acknowledged quietly. He looked around at the remains of the house around him. "Would you believe that it was Harry that did all this?"

Lupin and Tonks looked up at him in shock. "A sixteen year old boy, do all this?" Tonks asked in disbelief. "How?"

Dumbledore shrugged. "I'm afraid I don't know. But I do know that Voldemort had no time to gather magic strong enough to do all this, and I doubt he would've thought to put a shield around the Dursley's either. And the wand is hot, like it had been used to channel more magic than it was capable of."

"But it's phoenix feather, isn't it?" Moody's voice appeared from just behind the headmaster. "They are supposed to be quite resilient to strong bursts of magic."

"Evidently not of this calibre" Dumbledore replied. He raised his own wand and elevated the Harry's wand up into the air. He created a protective case around it and then placed the wand into his pocket.

"I don't think we will find Harry here." He said sadly, walking away.

"Where is he?" Lupin asked the retreating figure. "Albus, where is he?" He jumped up to follow and grabbed the aging man's arm.

Dumbledore shrugged again. "I'm afraid I don't know." He said. "Could've transported himself anywhere with that sort of magic. And I cannot rule out the possibility that Voldemort has him. The fact that all the Death Eaters disappeared at the same time as the blast suggests that they are connected."

Lupin's heart sank as the headmaster's words sunk in. "James, Lily, Sirius, and now Harry." He muttered, his eyes staring blankly at the ground and he fell to his knees, his breaths shallow and quick.

He felt movement next to him and looked up to see Tonks standing there. "Let's get you back to Hogwarts." She said quietly. "We can plan what to do from there."

Lupin nodded slightly and allowed himself to be helped to his feet and led to the end of the road where they apparated back to the school where he had once been so happy.

Chapter 5: Voldemort's circle.

Severus Snape swore silently as his arm burned for the eighth time that evening. The frequency and number of the hails meant only one thing; that Voldemort was waiting for him. He pointed his wand and the flames beneath his bubbling cauldron subsided as he grabbed at the large leather bag that was resting besides his desk. He figured that the mission that evening had not gone well, and he suppressed a smile as he headed down a long torch lit corridor to the main hall, anticipating that Dumbledore had received his warnings in time and that he was now being called to treat the wounded.

His happiness was short lived, however, as he opened the large doors that led into the main hall and saw the large circle of Death Eaters that stood in the customary circle, without their hoods and masks.

He stepped forward to his place to the right of the large chair that stood at one end of the circle, and fell to one knee. He lowered his head to the man that sat there and murmured his apologies.

"I don't want to hear them, Snape." Voldemort hissed. "I would've thought that you of all my followers would have been the first here to celebrate our achievement this evening."

Snape's blood ran cold as he raised his head and followed his master's finger to a bundle of muggle clothes in the middle circle.

"Potter?" he whispered.

"Indeed!" Voldemort acknowledged excitedly.

"But ... how...?" Snape caught his breath, and managed to replace his mental mask over his emotions. "What about the wards that I told you Dumbledore had placed over him?" he asked in a less shaky tone.

Voldemort laughed again, as did a number of the Death Eaters around the circle, men whom Snape recognised had been drafted onto the mission. "It seems that Mister Potter here was able to deal with those for us." He stepped down off his raised chair, and made

his way to the unconscious bundle in the middle of the room. He pushed the body with his foot until it had turned over and Snape was able to see Harry's pale face, half of it covered with dry blood that seemed to originate from his scar. "He produced an energy surge, stronger than anything I have ever seen, I admit, but I was able to tunnel the power into apparating the team back here." He paused and smiled a little. "It seems that Mister Potter and myself could make quite a formidable team if I could convince him to join our ranks."

"But what if he doesn't want to join ... our ranks?" a small voice asked. Snape's eyes briefly rested on the cowering figure of the man they called Wormtail before snapping back to focus on Voldemort's answer.

"We have ways to persuade him." The Dark Wizard replied. "If not, then I have stumbled across some ancient magic that should allow me to take on Mister Potter's strength and powers, and be able to control them how I will." His smile returned. "But we can always allow him to decide."

He spun to face Snape. "I trust you brought your potions with you?"

Snape nodded. "Of course, my master." He said, bowing his head again.

"I want you to wake up our young guest. I want him to be fully aware of the options he has." He smile turned into a grin that sent a shiver down the potion professor's spine. "And as I suspect he will not be willing to join our ranks without a fight, then I would like him to be aware of the pain he has put me through these past fourteen years."

Snape stepped forward with his bag and knelt by the still body. Closer up the boy looked sicker than he had thought. "Did you not try to enervate him?" he asked as he opened Harry's eyes and shone a light from the end of his wand into them, seeing how his pupil's responded. Then he rested his hand lightly against his student's neck and slowly counted his weak pulse.

"Of course!" Voldemort spun and returned to his chair, obviously an effort to not curse the potion master. "But Harry has not been harmed,

he is just exhausted from the power he has produced this evening. A simple enervate charm would not be able to keep him conscious enough for what I want him to suffer tonight.”

Snape nodded, and opened his bag, pulling out a couple of vials and reading their labels before finding one and holding it to the light.

“I will start him off on weak doses.” He replied, and held up his hand as Voldemort started to enquire why. He knew that he was treading a very fine line in speaking up against the Dark Wizard, but he also knew that he was the only one in the room that was able to produce the potions that Voldemort required. This allowed him an element of freedom, which was probably why Voldemort accepted him back in the first place. “This way,” he continued. “I can increase the dosage without fear of an overdose, allowing him to stay awake longer so you can have your ... fun.” He mentally shuddered at his last words, but the others in the circle seemed to accept his reasoning.

Snape then raised Harry’s head, resting it slightly in his lap as he pulled the top off the vial, and then pulled at the back of his neck, letting the boy’s head fall back and his mouth open so the potion could be poured freely into his mouth.

Once Snape was sure most of the thick liquid had disappeared down the boy’s throat, he stood up and made his way back into his place in the circle. “He should be awake in about five minutes,” he confirmed at Voldemort’s questioning gaze. And held his breath hoping that he was right.

True to his prediction, the pile of clothes in the middle of the room began to stir within a couple of minutes, and Voldemort called Lucius Malfoy forward to conjure up a post to which Harry was stood up against and chained. A few minutes after that the boy’s head rose from its hanging position, gazing blankly at the circle of men around him.

“Welcome to my home, Harry Potter.” Voldemort said, stepping forward until Harry’s unfocused eyes were able to identify him. “I’m sure you expected something grander, but as of yet I haven’t had that much time to redecorate.”

There were a few sniggers around the circle of Death Eaters, but these were halted as Voldemort held up his hand, leaning closer into the semiconscious boy to try and identify what he was mumbling.

"Speak up, boy. Let us all hear what you have to say."

"What do you want with me?" Harry's voice was hoarse as if his throat was dry, but as he spoke Snape noticed a determined look pass through his bright green eyes that pulled Harry's chin up defiantly and seemed to give him strength.

"I want to continue the conversation we were having at your caring family's house." He replied. "You do remember what you did back there, don't you Harry?"

Harry frowned slightly. Even though he was feeling better, and the potion was steadily improving his condition, Snape could see that his brain still wasn't working at full pace. He sneered slightly, thinking to himself that even if the boy did become fully capable of thought, it would not be that much better than that of a snail.

"You came to Privet Drive," he said, his eyes moving as if he was mentally replaying what had happened barely an hour before. "You had set off the charms around the house, and Dumbledore arrived, and then there was a big explosion...." His eyes bulged briefly and the boy looked up at the Dark Wizard. "The Dursleys?" he asked.

Voldemort laughed. "Do you remember what caused the explosion Harry? Don't you remember the surge of power that destroyed the house and brought us here? Don't you remember where that power came from?"

Harry's eyes narrowed in anger. "The Dursleys!" he repeated. "Where are they? What did you do to them?"

"Me?" Voldemort mocked that he was insulted. "Why, I did nothing to them, my dear boy." He said. "But your fears are right, they are probably dead by now. Killed by the shock wave that came from you!"

Harry shook his head in disbelief and met Voldemort's gaze. "They can't be dead." He said. "I set a shield up around them. To protect them."

Voldemort took a step forward so that he was looking down into Harry's face. Snape could see there was a battle of wills going on between the tall figure of the Dark Lord with his red eyes and snake like face, and the young lad who, Snape realised with a shock, had grown a lot in the couple of weeks since he had last seen him at Hogwarts. More amazingly, Snape realised that the boy was able to clearly focus on the wizard standing in front of him even though he was missing his glasses.

Voldemort suddenly broke the growing build up of tension with a nod. "In which case the likelihood that they survived is pretty high." He said quietly. "Don't you see, Harry? You can achieve anything you put your mind to. You just need someone who can open your mind."

"And you think you can do that, Tom?" Harry's voice was hard and cold. But this didn't deter the Dark Wizard in front of him.

Voldemort reached out his hand and gently ran it down the side of Harry's face like he had in the graveyard over a year before. "Of course I can." He said with a smile. "Look what I have motivated you to achieve before now."

"The only thing you have motivated is my hatred of you." Harry spat, thrashing against the chains that held his hands above his head. "You are nothing but a murderer. You won't win, Tom."

Voldemort's eyes flashed angrily at the use of his real name and he raised his hand to slap Harry around the face. The boy barely flinched, however, and Voldemort let his arm fall again, taking every ounce of effort he had to calm his voice. "Sometimes anger is a very powerful source of motivation." He said. "Join with me, and we can develop this together. You can provide the raw power, and I can focus it on achieving our goals."

"Your goals, you mean." Harry spat back, his emerald eyes flashing angrily. "I will never join you. I will never become like you."

Voldemort lost his patience and grabbed Harry's chin in his hand. "But you are like me, boy. Or do you not realise that yet?"

When Harry didn't reply he spun around and pointed to one of the Death Eaters standing opposite Snape. "Very well." He said, taking his seat once more. "If you do not wish to join us, then I see that we shall have to try and convince you."

The Death Eater that he had pointed to stepped forward, bowing his head slightly to his master before cracking his knuckles and allowing a hungry grin to appear on his face. Snape gulped slightly. He had seen what Avery was capable of when torturing his victims, and it turned his stomach to think of what he was about to do to the boy. He glanced around him, trying to think of a distraction, before Avery could get near to Harry.

Harry. Snape's eyes fell onto the chained boy and was shocked to see his bright eyes staring into his. With a nearly unnoticeable movement, Harry gave his head a quick shake. Snape frowned slightly, wondering if the boy knew of his loyalties. Maybe he had recognised the significance of his conversations with Dumbledore and his visits to the Order's headquarters. He sneered slightly, his eyes still linked with those of his student's. Maybe the boy was able to think after all. Then with a shock realised that the boy's eyes were telling him not to try anything, to keep his cover. Damn that Gryffindor pride, Snape thought, and turned his attention to Avery who had pulled two knives from his belt and was now brandishing them threateningly in front of Harry, who stared back without any emotion in his face.

Snape watched with growing horror and Avery went about his business, slicing at Harry clothes until the baggy jumper and dull grey t-shirt that the boy had been wearing had been cut away, exposing his tanned and maturing torso.

Then Avery let out a small laugh as he allowed the point of his blade travel across Harry's body, as if he was trying to find the best place to start his torture. Snape watched as Harry's eyes followed the blade, and then raised themselves to stare at Voldemort defiantly as Avery

finally nicked his skin against his ribs, allowing the small trail of blood to make its way down to Harry's waistband.

Avery's work lasted over the hour, starting off with hundreds of small nicks of the skin until Harry's front was shining all over with the tiny streams of blood that ran down, and then taking pleasure in larger strokes, joining his first cuts in some twisted child's game of dot-to-dot. The potions master felt a rush of pride as not once did Harry cry out, but it was clear after the hour that the potion Snape had given him had worn off, and that the blood loss was making the boy dizzy and weak as his head began to weave slightly on his shoulders.

Not long after Harry's head had fallen forward for the last time Voldemort called for Avery to finish. The Death Eater looked hurt as if the Dark Wizard had taken away his favourite toy, but obediently stepped away and accepted the praise given with a small bow as he once again took his place in the circle. But the hungry looks he kept sending towards the now unconscious boy made Snape seethe with anger and he knew that once his true alliances were revealed, he'd make Avery pay for his sadistic nature.

"My followers, I can assure you that you will all get the chance to take out your pleasures on our delightful guest." He smirked slightly as he ran a hand over Harry's oozing chest, covering his finger tips in blood. "I may even give a prize for the man who can amuse me the greatest in his activities." He raised his fingers to his face and held them to his nose for a couple of moments as if inhaling the scent of the boy's pain. "Snape!" he turned and stared at the potions master. "You will follow Crabbe and Goyle down to the dungeons where you will treat Potter." He held up his hand to Avery's protests. "I did not say I wanted him healed, Avery" he hissed. "I just want him to be aware enough for the next session." He turned back to the boy and wiped his blood soaked fingers down the side of Harry's face. "By the end of the week I want him shaking with fear every time he enters this room." And with that he walked passed the post, walking through the double doors and disappearing into the corridor beyond.

Chapter 6: Telling All.

Lupin sat in Dumbledore's office; his head resting heavily in his hands and he barely registered the appearance of the mug of tea on the desk in front of him as the Hogwart's headmaster walked around the desk to take his seat on the other side.

The two of them sat in silence for a couple of moments, Dumbledore appreciating the need for Lupin's deep thoughts whilst cursing himself that he had waited as long as he had to pick Harry up and bring him to Hogwarts.

In his hands he subconsciously played with a small necklace with a bright red feather hanging off it. It was warm to the touch and had been charmed to let the headmaster know where the boy was at all times. He had known that the boy was in danger. He knew Voldemort would soon find out where the boy was being held and the necklace was going to be a gift from the headmaster to the boy as a form of protection. But, like he had done since Harry was taken to the Dursley's when he was a baby, Dumbledore had held off, hoping deep inside that something would happen that would prevent the boy from suffering any more of the anguish that Fate seemed to have in store for him. He had been wrong once more.

The silence was broken by the snap of the fire as it glowed green, indicating that someone was entering the office through the floo network and both men looked up to see Tonks step through the flames, followed closely by the glowing red hair of Arthur and Molly Weasley and their son, Ron.

"Albus, what's going on?" Arthur asked, stepping forward to the desk. "I was in the process of accepting an avalanche of owls when Tonks here turned up saying that you needed to see us urgently. I thought we were supposed to meet at the station?"

"Did you get a chance to read any of the owls?"

Arthur shook his head. "I figured by the urgency in Tonks' voice that I was needed here more. Why, was there something in them that I should have read?"

Ron stood by his father's side and looked down at Lupin as he sat, still unmoving with his head in his hands at his desk. "Remus?" he asked, his heart going cold at the dejected figure. "Where's Harry?"

Lupin's head shot up to look the tall red-head in the eye, but was unable to hide the truth that lay there.

"Oh no." Ron said, his shoulders fell and he felt his father's hand on his shoulder. "What's happened to him? Is he ...?"

"We don't know." Dumbledore interjected, shooting Lupin a comforting look before conjuring up a couple more chairs. "If you will take a seat for a few minutes, Ms Granger will be arriving with Moody and I will tell all that I know."

"Which isn't much." Remus muttered, replacing his head into his hands.

The fire spluttered again, and the familiar clunk of Moody's wooden leg hit the floor as he directed Hermione to one of the two empty chairs.

The bushy haired girl looked at Ron with fear in her eyes. "Harry...?" her voice broke as she sat down and watched her friend nod slightly. Her eyes darted between all the people in the room. "Is he okay?"

Dumbledore held up his hand. "We honestly don't know." He said, and launched into the happenings of the evening. "The Dursley's house was attacked by Death Eaters a couple of hours ago." He glanced at Arthur. "That was probably what all those owls were about. I expect you will be called to go and help clear up the mess. A couple of muggles, Harry's neighbours, were killed by the Avada Kadavra curse. When we arrived Voldemort was standing in front of Harry's house, next thing we know there was a great surge of magic. The house was destroyed and Harry and the Death Eaters were gone."

He watched as those he had brought to the office stared in shock. Only Lupin moved, his hand moving slightly so that he could wipe his eyes on the back of his wrist.

"We found the Dursley's shortly after." He continued. "They had been protected by some sort of shield. A shield that I believe Harry placed over them moments before the explosion..."

Hermione looked up. "Harry. Did he... Is he...?"

Dumbledore shrugged sadly. "I believe, and this I do not know for sure, that the magic that destroyed the house came from Harry. We have known for a long time that he strong in the magical sense, and I believe that the stress of the situation meant that Harry lost control of his feelings, hence the explosion."

"But you didn't find him." Ron stated, his voice void of all emotion.

Dumbledore shook his head. "No. We didn't. I think that his magic somehow made all the Death Eaters and himself disappear. Where they went, and if he is still with Voldemort we won't know until we can get word from our contact in Voldemort's inner circle."

"Snape." Ron said.

"Professor Snape." Dumbledore corrected automatically. "And yes, it is word from him that I am waiting for. Though I trust that information won't go any further than this room."

Hermione nodded slightly and looked up at her headmaster with tears in her eyes. "Do you think Harry will be okay?"

Dumbledore looked down at his hands where the chain was still wrapped around his long fingers. "I hope so." He said. "I feel responsible for not getting him away from the Dursley's sooner."

"He was supposed to be coming to Hogwarts tonight." Moody explained to Ron and Hermione. "True to our word we've been keeping in close contact with him, and he admitted to us that he was still having problems with his scar and the nightmares associated with it. We were going to be bringing him here so that he could work on his Occlumency with Dumbledore."

“And now he’s gone.” Ron’s voice shook with anger as he looked Dumbledore in the eye.

The headmaster nodded. “Indeed he is. I can only hope that, if he is with Voldemort’s followers that Snape will somehow be able to get word to us about his location so that we can send out a rescue party to bring him home.”

“How long do you think it will take?” Molly Weasley asked in a small voice. Ever since she had first met Harry she had treated him as one of her own sons, sympathetic to the boy who had lost his parents at such a young age.

Dumbledore shrugged. “I do not make set times to meet with Severus, especially now that Voldemort is becoming more active. I cannot allow him to endanger himself in that way.”

“Well he had better make an effort now.” Lupin muttered, slamming his palm against the heavy oak desk. “That boy is worth more than he’ll ever be. The sooner we hear that he is okay and can bring him home the better.”

Dumbledore frowned. “I don’t think I’ve heard you speak in such a way, Remus. You cannot afford to loose your calm head at a time like this.”

“But he’s right.” Ron spoke up. “Snape hates Harry, that’s no secret. He always picks out Harry for the worst treatment in our potions lessons. He deliberately destroyed all Harry’s attempts at the potions we made last year, especially after those stupid lessons he had been having with him. And now you are expecting him to hurry home to tell us that Harry is okay.” He shook his head sadly. “It won’t happen.”

Dumbledore let Ron’s words fall into the silence of his office, absent of the usual clicks and whistles of his various gadgets that littered the sides. Even all the portraits of the headmasters and headmistresses of the past sat in silence. He shook his head slightly at the tall red head and spoke. “Severus is more human than you think, Ron. And even if he did have something personal against Mister Potter, I can assure you that he will make every effort to save him simply because

no one deserves to be put through the horrors Voldemort is capable of. Not even Harry.”

Chapter 7: To break free

Two days later, Snape was still hoping for the moment when he could get word to Dumbledore to let him know about Harry. He had long before decided that an owl would be impossible as Voldemort had increased the security around the old Riddle home in case Harry somehow managed to escape the prison which held him and attempted to make a run for it. The increased security also meant that the potions master was unable to secretly apparate out of the grounds to spread the word himself. Instead Snape was trapped in the building, concentrating on producing more and more potent healing potions to keep Harry alive for the next torture session.

The torture sessions were held regularly. Well, as regularly as Harry's return to consciousness was, which was becoming less and less frequent. Snape had noted with worry, even with the increased potency of his potions. Every Death Eater had had his chance on the boy, subjecting the boy to a variety of curses and hexes that sent a ripple of laughter through Voldemort's inner circle every time Harry cried out in pain.

Snape was currently on his way through the dark corridors under the Riddle household, his hands clutched around two large vials of potions. The smaller one in comparison would hopefully reduce the painful effects of the 20 long minutes Harry had been held under the cruciatus curse that morning, the other would hopefully provide the boy with a means of escaping, providing of course, that the boy still had his wits about him. Something that Snape almost believed impossible.

He swept his way through the dark passage that led to Harry's cell, not letting his act down for a second. Even though he had his heart in his throat he could not allow his nervousness to show, lest someone should suspect the contents of the larger vial and take their suspicions to Voldemort.

He paused as he neared the boy's cell, his eyes wide with shock as he realised that the door was slightly ajar, and with a leap of hope he silently prayed that the boy had come to by himself, however impossible that may be, and that he had managed to escape.

But his hopes were dashed as he heard heavy breathing and some muttered words within the cell. He pushed the door open further with his foot, allowing the light from the torch on the wall beside him to fall on the two figures on the floor in the middle of the room.

“Avery!” Snape spat out. “What do you think you are doing?”

Snape watched, his head bent back slightly and he looked down his nose at the figure who staggered to his feet, pulling his cloak back down and turning to face the intruder, hatred and hunger flashing in his crazed eyes.

“Getting my pleasure’s worth out of the lad before he becomes worthless. Why? Do you wish to join me Severus. It’ll be much more... pleasurable with three.”

Snape shook his head slightly, realising what sadistic ritual the Death Eater was about to conduct. “You’re sick.” He spat. “Get out now, and hope that I do not let Voldemort hear of this.”

Avery stepped up to close to Snape and looked deep into the potion master’s eyes. “Why, I believe you are going soft, Severus. I remember a time when you wouldn’t think twice about taking a young girl’s flower against her wishes.”

Severus mentally shuddered at the image of the one time he had committed rape in front of the other Death Eaters. He had been young at the time, and the memory of it still threatened to clear out his stomach. Even though the horrific sounds of the girl’s screams passed through his mind, his face remained expressionless. “But that is not a young girl.” He said. “And he is not yours. He belongs to our Master. Any extra sessions you want with him you shall conduct on your time, with his permission, not when I have been ordered to bring the boy back to life. Understood?”

Avery snarled, and for the first time Snape noticed the redness of his teeth and mentally cringed. “Clearly.” He hissed, then turned, blowing the unconscious body a kiss before pushing past Snape and out into

the corridor. "Keep that thought, Potter." He muttered as he left. "I'll be back before you know it."

Once he was out of sight, Snape sucked in a deep breath of relief and took a few long strides to the body on the floor. Harry torso was still bruised from the morning session of curses, but there were now the new additions of Avery's teeth marks around his neck. The image made Snape urge, nausea turning his stomach as he thought of what might have happened if he hadn't walked in the moment he had.

He gently took the boy's neck, tipping his head back so that he could pass the strong healing potion through the swollen and split lips. The boy spluttered, and Snape smiled at the good sign.

"Good lad." He said. "Wake up now." He knew that under normal circumstances he would never talk to Harry in such a way, but down deep in Voldemort's dungeons, Snape knew the boy needed all the support he could get.

The teenager was clearly struggling to break through into consciousness. His head rolled slightly with the effort, and small moans escaped his parched throat. "Just open your eyes for me, Harry, let me know you're with me." The boy struggled to comply, and a few seconds later Snape was blessed with two identical orbs as Harry blinked his way back into reality.

"Professor?" Harry's weak voice broke and he started to cough, a small stream of blood running from the side of his mouth. "It hurts." He said, rolling his head away from the Hogwarts professor, trying to hide the tears that were forming in his eyes.

"I know, Harry." Snape said softly. "But you have to stick with me, okay? I'm going to try and get you out of here."

Harry's head spun back, his gaze meeting the Death Eaters. "How?" he whispered. "You can't let them know...about you."

Snape smiled grimly. "I think my time here is running out, Potter." He said. "As Avery said, I'm going soft in my old age."

He noticed a small smile cross Harry's face, before he started to cough again.

"What's so funny?" Snape asked once the fit had passed. He was still supporting Harry's head gently in his lap and the boy looked up at him.

"I would never have thought you would try and help me." The boy said. "After the way you've treated me all these years."

Snape shrugged. "Don't think this will change things when you get back to school" he said, and Harry smiled again.

"If I get back." He murmured.

"Yes, about that." Snape glanced up at the door to make sure no one else had taken it upon themselves to visit the boy. "Harry, I have a potion here, there is a lot of it, and it's not going to be easy to keep it down, but you have to try, okay?"

"What is it?" Harry asked, pushing weakly against the floor in attempt to sit up.

Snape watched at his futile efforts, hoping that his plan was going to work. Over the past forty-eight hours the trust Harry had shown in Snape had grown immensely as his strength ebbed. Snape was sure that if he hadn't been here, the boy would probably be worse off than some of the people that were currently residing in St Mungos. He felt he now owed it to the boy to get him out and safe.

"It's going to make your magical powers come back." Snape said. "The reason Voldemort is doing all this to you is to prevent you having the time to recuperate by yourself, this should speed up the process. Once you feel strong enough, I want you to apparate out of here. Get to Hogwarts. I'll meet you there as soon as I can."

"But, I don't know how. And what about the wards?"

Snape shook his head. "Harry, you apparated all the Death Eaters here after their attack on your home. And do you have any idea how

strong those wards were around Privet Drive? You can break through it. Just imagine the grounds of Hogwarts, picture them clearly in your mind and wish yourself there.”

Harry looked at the potion Snape was holding out to him. “I don’t know if I can.” He said.

“Dammit, Potter.” Snape resorted back to his mask and glared at the boy. “For once in your life have some faith in yourself and get this potion down you.”

Harry slowly took the potion, stunned into silence by Snape’s outburst. “It’s hard to have faith in yourself when your professors pour your best efforts down the sink.” He muttered, but still raised the large vial to his lips and downed the potion as best he could.

Snape nodded encouragingly as Harry’s chest began to heave. “Keep it down, Harry.” He raised his head to the door as he heard footsteps. “They’re coming,” he said in a quieter voice. He leaned into the urging boy. “They’ll take you back upstairs. Don’t try anything until you feel strong enough.” He took Harry by the shoulder and made the boy look into his eyes. “Don’t waste this chance, Harry, it’s going to be the only one you get.”

The boy nodded, holding his belly firmly as his stomach threatened to evict its contents.

“What did you do to him this time, Snape?” The potions master looked up to see Lucius Malfoy looking down at him.

“He’s getting worse.” He replied calmly, rising to meet Malfoy’s gaze. “The potions I am giving him can’t get much stronger.”

Malfoy nodded, never letting his eyes leave Snape’s for a second. “Indeed.” He said. “Crabbe, Goyle, please escort Mister Potter upstairs for his next session.” He pushed open the door to let the two large men to carry the pale and sweaty boy through. “Would you care to join us, Severus?”

Snape mentally shivered at the venom in the rich Wizard's voice, but nodded at his false request. "After you, my dear Lucius." Was his reply and he followed the silver blonde Death Eater out of the cell and down the dark corridor to where the other death eaters were waiting.

He took a deep but hidden breath as he took his place in the circle, watching the Hogwarts student carefully as he was once more chained to the post, hanging from his shackles as Crabbe and Goyle stepped away. He could still see the heaving in the boy's chest as Harry concentrated on keeping the potion down. Snape just hoped that the potion would take effect before any of the Death Eaters had too much time to inflict injuries that would incapacitate the boy, making him unable to apparate out of there.

His hopes rose when Harry raised his head, his dull green eyes meeting those of the Dark Lord before a snarl escaped his lips. "You monster." He screamed, struggling against his bonds. "You will not get away with this."

Voldemort laughed. "And I suppose you think you can do anything about it." he returned, and with a quick spin turned to Snape. "It seems you have increased the dosage of his healing potions."

Snape watched as Harry continued to struggle and nodded. "It was necessary, my Lord." He replied in a steady voice. "Anything less potent would not have made him aware of his surroundings, something you specifically asked me to ensure."

Voldemort nodded, and had a small smile on his face. "Indeed, I did, Severus." He turned, walking around the circle in his small ritual of choosing a Death Eater to perform the torture in this session. Behind him Snape shuddered slightly, unsure of the secret smile the Dark Lord had shared with him. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Malfoy smile in a similar way, and Crabbe and Goyle, in their subtlety were laughing between themselves. The humour worried Snape. It was almost as if they knew something that they were unwilling to share with him. He quickly thought about the past couple of days, retracing his steps to see if he had made any obvious mistakes to disclose where his loyalties really lay, but his musings were interrupted when

Voldemort shouted out a name he had been dreading. "Avery! Do your worst!"

Snape saw Harry send him a fleeting look before the boy stared stonily ahead. He was no longer looked nauseous, and Snape could see he was now standing on his own two feet rather than relying on the chains that held him to the post to hold him up. "C'mon boy." He muttered under his voice. "Get up the courage and go!"

Avery in the meantime had made his way to stand in front of the teenager. "Did you keep your mood for me, my pretty?" he asked, running one finger down the side of Harry's face. Snape admired the boy even more when he didn't flinch. "If not, we can soon bring it back." He pulled out his wand and held it towards the boy who defiantly stood up straight. "Laceratus Restoro."

Above the pounding in his ears Snape could almost hear the skin tear as he watched the boy's face creased with intense pain. Almost instantly he could see the trails of blood make their way down his skin as all the wounds that Avery had inflicted with his first encounter with the boy reopened.

"Good." Voldemort called the Death Eater back, who returned to his place in the circle, clearly wishing that he could spend more time with the boy. "Now, onto other business..."

Snape gulped slightly as the Dark Wizard walked towards him, stopping only a few feet away and staring into his eyes. "For a long time, Severus, you have managed to prevent me from entering your mind to see just how loyal you are. Your Occlumency skills are very impressive. However they have resorted to my testing your loyalty in another way." Snape held his breath as one of the Death Eaters in the circle opposite stepped forward, bending low in respect of the Dark Lord. "You have been followed for a long time now, Severus. And I must admit that the reports that have been returned to me have been less than amusing."

"My Lord?" Snape asked questioningly, though his eyes never left those of the small man with a silver hand who was standing just behind the Dark Lord.

"I am sure you are aware of Pettigrew's remarkable party trick." Voldemort continued, taking to pacing around the circle. "And it is remarkable how few people notice a rat stalking along the corridors of such places such as Hogwarts. Makes you question the cleanliness of such a prestigious place."

Before he knew it Snape felt two Death Eaters step up behind him and take his arms. "And whereas his word has never been the most trustworthy, I admit that the idea that you have been telling our movements to that muggle- loving fool Dumbledore have become less than impossible."

"My Lord..." Snape repeated as the grip on his arms tightened and he felt himself being forced to the ground.

"Do not fear, Severus." Voldemort said quietly from where he was standing near Harry. "I will let you live. Though what you might see as quality of life now will be nothing more than a dream when I am through with you. I want you to take a message back to Dumbledore for me. I trust you are listening?"

Snape nodded, his eyes darting around the room for a possible escape route, but each time his eyes were drawn to the bound boy standing against the post, his green eyes glowing strangely bright through the stream of blood that ran down his face from the scar on his forehead.

"Tell him that Harry will not be the annoying student that you have taught these past few years for much longer. By the end of the week he will be standing by my side, his growing strength and power will be mine to control. Assure Dumbledore that the wizarding world will feel the wrath of the two of us before the end of the month. Do you understand?"

Snape nodded, but he couldn't tear his eyes from Harry to look at the wizard before him. There was a strange glow around the boy's hands that were tied above his head and he could see the boy's lips murmuring silent words.

“CRUCIO!” Snape screamed as the curse hit his body, his muscles convulsing against the pain inflicted upon him. Before long he heard the unforgivable being repeated, until he was sure that all the men in the circle were holding him under the curse. But beyond the pain he could hear another voice whispering to him. It was vaguely familiar, but Snape was unable to understand how he was able to hear the words over his own screaming, nor recognise its origin whilst under the curse. All he could do was reach out to the voice, willing himself to understand what was being said to him. “Be safe! Remember Hogwart’s!” With a start he recognised the words of Harry Potter, and a fleeting image of the Hogwart’s lake reflecting the image of the old castle flittered through his mind before he fell with a jolt into a dark abyss where he felt nothing.

Chapter 8: Return to Hogwarts.

Remus walked morosely down the driveway of Hogwart's castle, Tonks walking silently by his side. Her appearance today once again matched her mood, her long dark hair falling past her shoulders and over her face, and her pale arms crossed protectively over her chest.

"I just can't believe he has him, you know?" she said quietly and Remus nodded. "It just happened too fast, none of us had a chance to get near, let alone rescue him."

Remus nodded again, his eyes directed down at his feet but they didn't see the road and he stumbled slightly on a loose rock as they walked.

"How are you taking it, Remus?" she asked, turning to her fellow Order member.

He shrugged. "Not that well." He admitted. "I haven't slept much since it happened, too many thoughts running through my mind..." He sighed and kicked another stone out of his path. "I promised him I'd take him away from there. That he would be coming back here to be safe."

"You couldn't have helped it." Tonks said, reaching out briefly and touching his arm. "We were all going to go that night anyway. It was just bad luck that we turned up just those few moments too late."

"Bad luck." Remus repeated dully. "That seems to be all the luck that poor boy has. First his parents, then Sirius last year... That boy has been through the worst of it and he hasn't even seen his sixteenth birthday yet." He kicked a stone a little harder and watched as it bounced off the road into the bush that ran alongside. "If I had only stayed with him that day. Helped him pack or something, then at least he would have had a chance."

"No, Voldemort knew who he was after."

"I could've helped him."

“No, Remus.” Tonks stopped and shook her head. “You would be dead. There was nothing no one short of Dumbledore could have done that night. All we can do is hope that Severus gets some word to us soon; let us know that the kid is doing okay. Then we can think about getting him out of there.”

Remus nodded, knowing that all the members of the order were on the look out for some sign from the potions professor. “Do you know what Dumbledore was going to give Harry as a welcoming present when he got here?” he asked Tonks as they started to walk towards the gates once more. She shook her head and he continued. “A small silver necklace, with one of Fawkes’ feathers hanging from it. It would act as a type of locator beacon; a way of tracking him down should he ever be taken.” He broke off and took a deep breath. “Poor man is driving himself nuts over it. Says that he should’ve given it to me to give to him that morning. So we would know where he was now.”

Tonks smiled slightly, and opened her mouth to say that Dumbledore felt the pain they were all feeling just as strongly, but was prevented from doing so by a loud crash from the line of trees that separated the drive from the lake.

Without a glance to one another, both of the Order members fell into a crouch and pulled out their wands, quickly advancing onto the small clump of trees where the noise had come from.

With short hand signals, Tonks, a trained auror, indicated that Remus should advance around the clump to the left, whilst she went to the right, that way they could trap the intruder in between them and take him back to the castle for questioning.

Remus nodded his understanding and made his way to his allocated direction, watching intently for any movement in the bushes or any sounds that would indicate the location of the stranger. He had almost made it to the clearing on the other side of the trees when he heard Tonks call his name, indicating it was safe.

“Its Snape.” She said when Remus found her kneeling besides Dumbledore’s spy. “I think he’s been under the cruciatus.”

Remus gently rolled the semi-conscious man over and nodded, noting the twitching muscles that were a sure sign of being hit with the unforgivable. "Let's get him back to Pomfrey." He said, and gently conjured a small stretcher which Tonks then levitated Snape onto.

A few minutes later they found themselves standing by Snape's bedside in the infirmary, watching as Dumbledore and Madam Pomfrey assessed his condition.

"Where did you find him?"

"We found him down by the lake." Tonks said. "Sounded as if he apparated down there."

Dumbledore frowned. "Apparated?" he looked to the werewolf who shrugged.

"It certainly sounded that way, Albus." Remus agreed. "We assumed that he had just come from a meeting with Voldemort. He showed the symptoms of being under the cruciatus so we brought him straight up here."

"One curse couldn't have produced this much muscle spasm." Pomfrey interjected as she poured out some potions into a goblet and stirred it with the end of her wand. "Not even a curse cast by You-Know-Who would have produced a reaction like this."

"But he'll be okay?" Dumbledore asked, helping as the school medi-witch poured the goblet's contents down his throat.

"He'll be fine. Probably be out of bed by tomorrow morning knowing him." She said and the headmaster nodded. "Though I would suggest a couple of days rest before he goes traipsing back for more of the same, if you know what I mean."

Dumbledore nodded. "I'll make sure he doesn't leave the grounds." He assured the witch and she nodded.

"Leave him to rest for now, you can talk to him in the morning." She said, and picked up the now empty potion vials, carrying them back into her office.

Once the door was shut Dumbledore pulled out his wand and aimed it at his colleague.

"I thought Pomfrey told you to let him rest," Tonks said.

"But we also need to find out about Harry." Dumbledore reminded her gently before muttering the enervate charm. With fluttering eyelids the potion master woke up, his hands still twitching slightly despite the potions he had been given.

"How are you feeling, Severus?" Dumbledore asked gently and the professor shook his head.

"He knows. He knows about me..."

Albus frowned. "Can you tell me what happened?" he asked. Snape shut his eyes for a few moments before speaking in broken sentences.

"Called us together...says Pettigrew has been following me...knows I am part of the Order...told me I would live....have to pass on a message..."

"What message, Severus?"

"That Potter would side with him by the end of the week...that he would control the boy's magic."

"What of Harry?" Tonks interrupted. "Is he okay? Where is he?"

Dumbledore held up his hand at her questioning and returned to the semi-conscious professor. "Was Harry there with you?" he asked.

Severus nodded and his eyes became wide. "Isn't he here?" he asked, attempting to push himself upright.

Dumbledore looked once more to Tonks and Remus who shook their head and shrugged respectively. "We didn't see anyone else." Remus said. "Did you bring him with you?"

Severus shook his head. "They were torturing him... I gave him a potion to boost his magic...hoped he could apparate himself out of there..." his face creased into one of pain at the memory. "He saved my life..."

"Go!" Dumbledore directed at the two Order members. "Find Minerva, and conduct a search of the area by the lake. Get the Hogwarts' ghosts to search the castle. He could be here somewhere."

Once they were gone he looked back at the pale man before him. "Would he have been able apparate you and himself out of there?" he asked.

Snape thought for a few moments. "He was hurt bad...bleeding heavily. The whole circle threw the cruciatus at me...but I could still hear his words even though they weren't spoken louder than a whisper...he was sending me home..." he looked at the headmaster. "What if he wasn't able too..." He swore. "Damn that Gryffindor pride..."

"Do you think it possible that he would still be with Voldemort?"

Snape thought for a moment. "His eyes glowed... full of magic...if he was able to apparate all the circle into the Riddle House, then surely he would be able to apparate the two of us out." He began to nod. "I'm certain he disappeared with me. But not to here." He looked around at the hospital's walls.

"Do you have any idea of where he is?"

"No. All I remember is him telling me to remember Hogwarts, then I saw the lake with the castle reflected...then nothing."

Dumbledore smiled slightly and nodded. "Sleep now." He said. "I'll let you know in morning what we find." And he left the potions professor

muttering under his breath about the foolishness of the young Gryffindor.

Chapter 9: The Boy

It was early morning, and a slight mist rolled off the lake and into the trees, hiding the floor and making the trees appear grey against the brightening sky. The silence that preceded the sun as it rose above the horizon would seem stifling to most people who weren't aware of its beauty and would impose a fear to those who weren't used to its unnatural stillness.

But to the old man who walked along the banks of the lake, this time was nothing but serene. It was a time to ponder, to remember old friends and to reminisce of the times he had spent here as a child. He smiled as he remembered a time when he used to run in the mornings, darting between the trees on the banks, splashing through the still water and startling the occasional deer. He had been carefree back then, and he had none of the troubles that he had now.

He walked to where the water met the earth and sat on a worn stone that jutted out of the ground and overhung the water. How many times had he stood upon those rocks, opened his arms and let the elements take control? And how long would it be before he could teach another to do the same? The old man sighed and looked down at his scarred hands, turning them over to examine their contours. Like the rest of his body they looked like they should have been laid to rest years before.

A call from a startled bird broke him free from his reverie and he turned from where he sat to stare into the trees. There was no movement, nothing to have startled the bird out of hiding. Yet he could sense there was something there; something powerful.

He stood up and started towards the trees from which the call had come, then jerked back as a figure came into view, staggering from the shadows and swirling the mist that lay at his feet.

The old man watched as the figure looked up, seemingly surprised at the sudden clearing, and stood still as the glazed eyes focused on his face. The elderly man wasn't scared. There wasn't much that scared him, but there was something about the dark haired stranger that made him catch his breath.

Suddenly the figure lurched forward again, this time falling to his knees with a groan that broke through the silence of the forest. The old man rushed forward and upon closer examination saw the man's face and naked torso to be covered with blood.

He caught the man as he fell forward, and gently turned him over, brushing the dark bangs away from the blood-crusted face. The old man frowned as he examined the man further. Man? No, this wasn't a man, he realised. It was a boy. A teenage boy. The boy looked up into the face of the old gentleman that had caught him as he fell, and the old man gasped to see a flash of intense emerald eyes before they rolled up and the body sank heavily into his embrace.

Even though the boy had obviously experienced intense pain, and probably had more internal injuries that could be imagined, the old man smiled slightly. He gently ran his hand across the boy's forehead, his fingers gently outlining the unique scar that was embedded there. His quest was nearly over.

Chapter 10: The meeting

It had been five days since they had been told about Harry's disappearance and Hermione had been staying with them, telling her parents that she would rather be in close contact with the wizarding world in case there was any news of her friend. Ron now stood beside her in the kitchen of the Burrow, his arms crossed protectively in front of him as he watched his mother prepare for the journey.

"The meeting is about Harry, isn't it? That's why we are allowed to go." Molly Weasley looked at her tall son and his friend and gave a small nod before looking down to finish tying her cloak. "Have they found him? Is he okay?"

Molly sighed. "We haven't heard anything since Severus Snape returned." She said. "This meeting is just to make everyone of the Order aware of all the details. "No secrets," is what Dumbledore said. He's really worried about the whole thing, and he feels that you two, as Harry's friends, have a right to be there and know what's going on."

"No secrets?" Hermione repeated quietly as Ron's mother took hold of the small pot which held the floo powder. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Ron shrugged and took a handful of floo powder as his mother held the pot out to him. "I guess we are about to find out." He muttered. And he stepped into the fire hearth and in a clearer voice called out "Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place!"

Moments later Hermione and his mother stepped out of the fireplace into the kitchen that once belonged to Harry's godfather. Silently the two Gryffindors followed Ron's mother out of the kitchen and up the stairs towards the study they had spent most of the summer before cleaning.

"We have recruited a number of new members." Molly explained as she paused with her hand on the door. "Hence the kitchen was no longer large enough to house the Order meetings. Just follow me in and stay quiet. Just because you are here does not mean that you

are now part of the Order, and I forbid you to even think about acting on anything you may hear in this room.”

Ron silently nodded to his mother, fully aware of the consequences he would have to face if he took it upon himself to search for Harry. He subconsciously rubbed at the scars that still showed on his arms from when he was attacked by the brains in the ministry a month before. His mother had desperately hugged him when he had returned to consciousness, then had proceeded to yell at him until Dumbledore felt it necessary to step in to calm her.

Once Molly Weasley was satisfied with the response of her son and his friend, she opened the door leading the students to some empty chairs that were placed around a the new edition of a large round table.

They tentatively took their seats, and Ron quickly glanced down in shock to see that Hermione had taken his hand in hers for support as she scanned the faces of the Order members that had already arrived. There were a large number of recognisable faces from the comings and goings of the Order members from the summer before. Tonks was sitting opposite them and gave them a quick wave before returning to the conversation she was having with One-eyed Moody and Kingsley Shackleton. Beside them sat the quiet figure of Remus Lupin, his face pale with dark shadows under his eyes. His hands clasped firmly on top of the desk. On the other side of Tonks sat Mundungus Fletcher, looking a lot more attentive than he did last year. Ron sensed that he was looking warily at his mother and quickly realised that the look was due to the lack of Sirius’ protection. It was no secret that his mother was not happy with the type of things Mundungus got up to. There were a couple more people that were recognised, many of which had been involved with bringing Harry to the Order headquarters the year before. Emmeline Vance was sitting next to Professor McGonagall who taught transfiguration at Hogwarts, both sitting up straight and prim in their seats as if they were competing in whom could sit the highest. Sturgis Podmore and Hestia Jones were also sitting with Hogwarts teachers, and Ron and Hermione were quickly acknowledged with nods from Professor Flitwick, Madame Hooch and Madame Pomfrey, the school nurse. The final familiar face was that of Hagrid, a half-giant who taught

Care of Magical Creatures at Hogwarts and who took up the space of two chairs on one side of the table.

He leaned forward slightly and smiled at them both. "Yeh alrigh'?" he asked. Ron glanced at Hermione as she nodded. He knew it was a lie as she had spent most evenings at the Burrow staring into the fire, her face creased with worry about what was happening to their friend. Hagrid nodded in understanding. "He'll be alrigh'" he said. "I know 'Arry. He won' let You-Know-Who beat him."

Hermione nodded, her eyes glistening with unshed tears and smiled as Ron squeezed her hand reassuringly. They broke eye contact to see two more familiar characters enter the room.

"Is everyone here?" Dumbledore asked, quickly taking his seat and examining the faces around the table. Snape silently took a seat next to him, and both Hermione and Ron noticed that he sat down gingerly, as if he was still in pain. "Good. I won't waste time with introductions and the like. Most of you are fully aware of one another and of what we are here to discuss tonight. There will be plenty of time for questions once we are done."

The headmaster of the school took a deep breath and arched his finger tips together in a steeple before continuing. "A week ago Harry Potter was paid a visit by Voldemort in the house of his Aunt and Uncle, a place we previously thought would protect him from any attacks due to the blood tie between his mother and her sister. It seems that even blood ties weaken over time and we were alerted to Voldemort's arrival by Arabella Figg who, in absence of other magical powers, was requested to keep an eye on Harry and was posing as a muggle who lived down the street.

"When we arrived there were a large number of Death Eaters trying to gain access to the house, which still held some wards against them. It seems though they were able to see and access the grounds, they were still unable to gain access into the house. Voldemort was talking to Harry through the front door, its glass already missing. As the other Death Eaters were still struggling to enter through the other windows on the first floor, I suspect this window was broken from inside. Namely Harry.

“We didn’t hear all that Voldemort was telling Harry, though I suspect, due to what happened afterwards, that Voldemort was trying to get Harry to join with him.” Dumbledore smiled slightly, though his eyes still lacked the twinkle that usually inhabited them. “Now Harry holds a lot of emotion for a boy his age, understandable considering what he has been through these past few years. I myself have been subject to some of these emotions, but nothing in comparison to what I believe we saw that night.

“I believe that Harry lost control of his emotions. And instead of simply smashing glasses or moving furniture, something that I am sure we are all prone to do when we are angry or upset, he created such a large amount of energy that he destroyed the house. When we were able to get near there was no sign of Harry, nor of Voldemort or of any Death Eaters. Other than a couple of his possessions left in what remained of his room, all that we found was his Aunt’s family safely sheltering in a protective dome in the hallway and his wand, its core very hot as would be expected with a powerful energy surge, which was found by the front door; the last place we saw Harry before the explosion.”

He picked up a glass of water and took a quick sip before looking across to his Potions master. Snape gave a quick nod and stood up, taking over the story.

“Harry indeed create that energy surge” he said. “You-Know-Who told me himself that the power came from Harry, though he was able to channel it into apparating all the Death Eaters back to the Riddle Manor, bypassing the anti-apparation wards placed on the Dursley’s house and also those, understandably stronger wards placed at the home of You-Know-Who. How Harry produced so much energy, and how the Dark Lord was able to control it in such a way I don’t know. All I know is that I was called up to deal with Potter, who was lying unconscious in the middle of His Inner Circle. He was suffering from magical exhaustion, and I was asked to make him strong enough to be aware of pain and its cause. I spent the next 48 hours watching as His circle put Harry through the worst torture I can imagine, and I was required to bring him around every time he lost consciousness.”

He took a deep breath as he saw the anguish on the faces of the Order members. Lupin had his head hidden in his hand, and many of the females sitting round the table had silent tears running down their faces, including Molly and Hermione.

"I eventually managed to slip him a potion to restore his magic, hoping that he would be able to apparate himself out of there in much the same way he had managed to get in. He was brought before the Circle once more before the potion had taken effect and wasn't strong enough to escape one more session of torture. It was then that my true loyalties were presented to the Circle. It appears the Peter Pettigrew had been using his animagus form of a rat around the grounds of Hogwarts, and had seen me reporting to Dumbledore. The next few moments, I am afraid to say, are a bit unclear. I was told by You-Know-Who pass a message onto Dumbledore, telling him that Harry would soon be fighting alongside Himself. I assume by this he meant that Harry would be providing the raw energy, and that You-Know-Who would be channelling that power in much the same way as he had at the Dursleys. Consequently I was subject to a number of unforgivables, but I was aware that Harry seemed to be radiating a power that I have never felt before. I am sure that he was the one who apparated me to Hogwart's, once more bypassing the anti-apparation wards of both the Riddle House and those protecting the school. I am also sure that he disappeared with me, though where he ended up I do not know. It was certainly not to Hogwarts."

He took a deep breath and sat down, his story finished. The Order circle sat in silence for a few moments before Dumbledore spoke up. "So, as you can see, Harry is still missing. And still hurt, possibly seriously according to what Severus has told me about his last torture session with Voldemort's circle. I imagine that Voldemort is searching hard for Harry. A chance to be able to control power such as that seen last week is a powerful incentive for him to get careless. I want you all to keep an eye out for any active Death Eaters. We are going to have to get more pro- active if we are ever going to survive this war. I, myself, am planning to go to Fudge and sort out someplace more appropriate than Azkaban to send all those we capture. The fool still isn't entirely sure what hit the ministry the other month, and we cannot afford to be sending all our hard efforts right back into Voldemort's hands.

"I want you all to also keep an eye out for any allies that can help us, both human and non-human. The more supporters we can have on our side the better. Any questions so far?"

Tonks raised her hand slightly and Dumbledore acknowledged her with a nod of his head. "What about Harry?" she asked. "I have been one of the people keeping an eye on him this holiday, the poor boy is still suffering from that mind-link he has with that monster. When you can hear him screaming at night it can be guaranteed that something awful would be published in the Daily Prophet the next day. Surely that link would mean that You-Know-Who would be able to work out where he is. Shouldn't we start searching for him ourselves?"

Dumbledore nodded. "I have already sorted that out with Remus." He said. "He will be going to any place that Harry may have accidentally apparated to. Places that look similar to Hogwarts, maybe somewhere he remembers from when he was a baby. For example Godric's Hollow. I know it isn't much, but to be honest I don't see what else we can do, other than keep a keen ear out and hope that he contacts us in some way."

A tentative hand went up from beside Molly Weasley and Dumbledore nodded slightly. "Hermione?" he asked.

"I really don't understand." She started shyly. "I don't understand why Vo- Voldemort is after Harry. There was that prophecy at the end of last term... did that have something to do with all the power that Harry has? Is there anyway we can find out what it said?"

"I didn't think you believed in predicting the future, Ms Granger." Dumbledore said. "I seem to remember that you gave up Divinations because of it."

Hermione blushed a little. "I gave up Divinations because Professor Trelawney did not seem to me to be nothing more than a fraud, placing a lot of unnecessary fear into the students."

Dumbledore nodded. "Then you probably won't believe me when I say that Prophecy was made by her. I was present when she slipped into the trance and spoke it."

Ron's eyebrows shot up, as did Remus' from the other side of the circle. "You know the whole of the prophecy?" the young Weasley asked.

Dumbledore nodded. "I do, Mr Weasley, though I am not going to go into any details here. What that prophecy said was only for the attention of those involved. The fewer people who know about it the safer Harry will be."

Hermione let out a quick laugh. "The darkest Wizard of the century is after Harry and you are saying that not telling us about some silly prophecy will keep him safe? It seems to me that he can't really be in any more danger."

The circle sat in silence, waiting for Dumbledore's response, Molly staring at the girl willing her to be quiet. Eventually Dumbledore spoke. "I promised no secrets in this meeting and so I guess you all have a right to know. The prophecy spoke of a baby being born; a baby that would develop enough power to destroy Voldemort. It predicted that Voldemort would mark that baby as his equal... and that is the part of the prophecy Voldemort already knows. One of his Circle overheard it when Trelawney was in the trance. In a sense he has played into the prophecy's hands, actively seeking out one of the two wizard babies born at the time stated in the prophecy. He picked Harry, obviously identifying with the boy more as he was part muggle like himself, and consequently marked him when the Avada Kedavra curse backfired."

"But there is more to the prophecy than that." Remus prompted when the headmaster stopped.

Dumbledore nodded, and the Order could see how upset he was to be telling them. He raised his eyes to the ceiling and muttered a small prayer under his breath "Please, Harry, forgive me" before continuing in a quiet monotone. "...Either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives..."

The silence that followed was long and uncomfortable as the Order members processed what Dumbledore had just said.

“And you’ve told him about this?” Remus asked, his voice cracking slightly.

Dumbledore nodded. “After the incident at the ministry I felt he had a right to know. I should have told him a long time before, but wished that the boy could lead a normal a life as possible without having to hold such a burden.”

“Harry’s life ain’t ne’er been normal.” Hagrid said quietly. “You-Know-Who has seen t’ that.”

There was a murmur of agreement around the circle and Hermione started to cry softly. “Why him?”

“If I could take the responsibility on myself, then I wouldn’t hesitate.” Dumbledore said. “I would normally question the credibility of such prophecies, especially ones made by non-accredited Seers. Like Ms Granger here, I gave up Divination during my time at Hogwarts in the belief that the subject is very imprecise and cannot be relied upon. But this prophecy has been true to its word so far. To the date that Harry was born, his parentage, and especially now he has displayed what his heightened emotions can do.”

“So what do we do now?” Shacklebolt asked. “Do we continue with our original plans or increase our search for Harry? If you ask me, the poor kid could do with some extra support right now. The sooner we find him the better.”

Dumbledore nodded. “That is why I was planning to bring him back to Hogwarts that evening. It wasn’t only to help him with his Occlumency skills. I wanted to make sure that he had the chance to ask any questions that would be bothering him; anything to make it easier for him. As for now, all I can suggest is that we continue as planned. If you do find him or hear from him, try to act normal. He wouldn’t appreciate the attention this would bring him.”

None of the Order members spoke up against the Headmaster's decision and Dumbledore checked to see if there were any more questions before calling an end to the meeting. As the Order members left the room, Ron and Hermione found the headmaster standing in front of them. "I suspect that the first people that he would try and contact would be one of you two, as you have always been there for him in the past." He said in a low voice, worry evident in his eyes. "If you hear from him, anything at all, then I want you to let me know immediately. In the meantime, I will allow you to continue to come to some of the meetings, if only because you deserve to know any possible leads we may have. Though I will only allow you to come on the understanding that you will not risk your life by going out and seeking him yourself. Do you understand?"

Ron and Hermione nodded silently, both understanding the concern the headmaster was expressing. Dumbledore smiled slightly. "Now go home, get some rest. We may have a long wait before he comes home."

Chapter 11: The Marcello School of Opportunity

Harry buried his head into the soft pillows, trying to drown out the pounding in his ears before he became aware that the noise was actually due to a large headache. He groaned softly and tried to relax back into the oblivion that had protected him from the pain before.

“Oh no you don’t, boy.” He heard a female voice mutter and he felt a hand brush against his forehead, bringing with it a sense of warmth and an uncontrollable urge to open his eyes. “Its time to wake up now.”

Harry blinked his eyes a couple of times against the bright light before he was able to make out the silhouette of a young girl standing by his bed.

He groaned again, screwing his face up against the pain in his head and tried to bring a hand up to rub against it. When he failed in his task he looked down to see both hands heavily bandaged, as was his chest that explained the tightness he felt when he breathed.

“What happened?” he attempted to ask the girl standing beside him, but all that was produced was an indecipherable moan.

But the moan seemed to make the girl smile and she looked across the room to someone standing out of Harry’s slightly blurred field of vision. “Leo! I think he’s awake. Properly this time!”

A shadow passed across Harry’s face and he looked to his left to see a blurred outline of a tall man standing there. He blinked a couple of times, and a short dark beard flecked with grey came into focus. He frowned, briefly wondering how his eyesight could be so good without his glasses before the man spoke to him.

“Welcome back, boy. How are you feeling?” he asked in a voice that Harry, in his semi conscious state, related to being similar to that of Remus Lupin.

Harry rolled his eyes, wondering how to describe the pain in his head and the irritating mixture of itchiness and pain produced by the

healing wounds under his bandages with the limited vocabulary that he had. But he surprised himself by producing a sound which described it all perfectly. "Ouch!"

The girl and her mentor laughed out loud. "I can believe that." The man said shortly after. "But I am sure that it is nothing compared to how you felt when you first arrived here."

Harry frowned, hoping that his desire to know where "here" was wouldn't go unmissed. He was lucky and it didn't.

"You arrived here at the Marcello School of Opportunity early yesterday morning." The man named Leo explained. "The Doyen found you wandering aimlessly down by the lake before you collapsed from your wounds. You have an impressive collection of them I must say. When you are feeling a little stronger maybe you would like to tell me how you got them?"

Harry shook his head and mouthed one word, producing a small whispered "Voldemort."

Leo frowned and the smile fell off the face of the girl. "Indeed, a story I would like to hear more of. But only when you are stronger. Now you are awake I suggest you let Kat here help you eat something to help you regain your strength. It seems to me you haven't eaten for a while, but if your claim of Voldemort being the cause of these wounds are true then starvation wouldn't surprise me."

Harry opened his eyes wider at Leo's fearless speaking of the Dark Lord's name, but accepted the man's help to sit up so that he would be able to eat.

"I'll leave you in Kat's safe hands for a short while. I need to tell the Doyen that you have awakened." And with that the tall bearded stranger walked out of the door.

Harry turned his attention back to the girl who had perched herself on the edge of his bed with a bowl of what appeared to be a thick soup. She seemed to be only a little older than he was, eighteen maybe, with long blonde hair falling loosely down her back with two small

braids on either side of slim face. She, like the man called Leo, was dressed in dark brown attire; a tight fitting top with long trousers and well-worn boots. Around her waist she wore a belt from which hung a large knife sheath, and upon closer inspection Harry could see a sword was sheathed across her back.

“Eat!” she said, and Harry realised she was holding a spoon laden with the soup in front of his mouth. “It may taste a bit odd, but that’s due to the strengthening potion I have added to it. It should help you regain enough strength to be able to talk to us properly and maybe let us know how you came to be here.”

Harry shrugged, trying to indicate that he didn’t know how he had got to where he was, but he immediately regretted the action when the tension of the healing wounds started another bout of painful itchiness. Nevertheless he opened his mouth obediently and took a mouthful of the soup, surprised that it didn’t taste quite as bad as the girl seemed to make out.

As he ate he thought about Voldemort’s circle. He could remember the accusations against Snape, and watching his professor scream under the cruciatus curse. He remembered willing the professor to be safe in a place like Hogwarts with its forbidden forest and giant squid inhabited lake. After that he had no memory of anything, other than the weakness caused by the Laceratus Restoro curse.

“Oops, missed.” His attention was brought back to the present by the girl as she used a small cloth to wipe his chin and front of his bandaged chest. “I’m sorry.” She said, looking slightly embarrassed. “I’m not really used to babysitting people in this way.” She placed the mostly empty bowl on the bedside table. “How are you feeling now?”

“Better.” Harry found himself able to reply in a slightly croaky voice. “And, to be honest, I’m not that used to being babied.”

The girl smiled at his, her blush gone and Harry found himself smiling back, entranced with her deep blue eyes.

“What’s your name?” Harry asked.

“Kat.” She replied. “Short for Kathryn, though most people find Kat more appropriate. You?”

“Harry.” Came the tentative reply. Harry almost expected her eyes to flicker to his scar and a look of realisation to cause her eyebrows to go up, but none of these responses happened. “Just Harry.” He repeated.

Kat nodded understandingly. “I’ve read about you,” she said, and when Harry raised his eyebrows questioningly she continued. “I examined your scar when you were unconscious. It was different from the others that you have. Leo made the connection between its shape and who you were.”

Harry stared at her blankly before he was able to find his voice. “And it doesn’t bother you?” he asked.

“Why would it bother me?” came the reply.

“I dunno.” Harry shrugged uncomfortably. “Most people seemed fascinated by it. Want to know more about it.”

Kat frowned at his comments. “Sounds like you’ve gotten used to the fame caused by it.” she said coldly and stood to take the bowl back to a larger table by the door. “I personally see it as a sign of an incident that occurred before you can probably even remember. And it’s unlikely that you or anyone else is aware of how you were able to defeat Lord Voldemort in the first place. Because of that, I see you as nothing special; just another boy craving attention.” She turned slightly to see the reactions of the Boy-Who-Lived. She expected to see a look of disbelief turn into one of anger and so was surprised to see the patient’s face break into a large smile.

“You really think that?” he asked. She nodded and his grin widened even more as he leant back into his pillows. “Finally, someone who can see me for me and not my past.”

Kat stared at him for a moment before saying. “You mean you don’t like all the attention?”

“You joking? It’s like a curse. I only found out about what happened between my parents and Voldemort when I was eleven and was invited to go to Hogwarts. Since then every new wizard or witch I’ve met has stared at me. I’ve had rumours started about me wanting to be the next dark wizard even before I even knew a proper transfiguration spell. Ever since I received that first Hogwarts letter people have expected me to be something great. Something powerful. And all they ever get is just me.”

“Just Harry.” Kat repeated and the boy nodded. Kat smiled at him again and sat back down on the bed, filled with a new respect for the boy in front of her. “I would very much like to hear about Hogwarts.” she said. “I don’t ever get out of the school grounds that much. My father is one of the Masters here, and he doesn’t find the need to leave very often. I’ve grown up here, and read a lot about the other schools and the rest of the wizarding world. But I’m sure its nothing compared to what the real thing is like.”

“You’re never been off these school grounds?” Harry asked incredulously and Kat shook her head sadly. “My father is very much involved with his work. You may understand more when Leo comes back to explain about the school and what we do here. He seems to think you might be interested.”

“Why?”

Kat shrugged. “He tells me of evil things in the world. This Voldemort being one of them.”

“You speak his name as if you aren’t scared of him.” Harry observed out loud.

“I’m not.” Kat stated bluntly. “Once you see what this school is capable of you’ll understand. You learn how to control your fear here.”

“The Marcello School of Opportunity. I don’t think I’ve ever heard of it before.”

"You wouldn't. Not many have. To most it is just a myth. A place rumoured to teach nothing by evil and darkness, lost in time and never recovered." Harry felt a slight chill go down his back at her words. "Most of the boys here were chosen by scouts, and disappear from their families without a trace to come here to learn."

"A boys school? But you're here!"

Kat looked down at her hands. "My mother died when I was young, and due to my father's position there was nothing else to do but raise me here. I have never left. I've grown to be the son my father wanted."

"Is your father that Leo fellow?"

Kat looked up startled, then smiled and shook her head. "No, but he was more of a father than mine ever was. You see Leo has a more paternal side than my father who sees me only as a weapon to be trained. Though to him I'm never good enough. Leo took it upon himself to teach me that it's okay just to be me. He showed me there was more to life than sword fighting, magical duelling and power battles."

"Sword fighting? Duelling? Is that what you teach here? This is a combat school?"

Kat nodded, "Marcello means warrior." She explained, though she didn't seem to be pleased at his sudden enthusiasm. But Harry didn't notice her change in demeanour. He thought only of the possibilities open to him if he was able to duel properly. The prophecy Dumbledore had told him at the end of his fifth year would come true before long, and if he was able to prepare for it... "I might stand a chance of defeating him." He said aloud.

"Defeat who?"

"Voldemort." Harry said. He hesitated only for an instant before telling Kat a brief version of Voldemort's return to the wizarding world and the prophecy Dumbledore spoke of. By the end of the tale Kat was sitting wide-eyed on the edge of his bed. "So you see?" Harry finally

finished. "If I was able to train here, I might actually stand a chance against Voldemort!"

"You?" Kat laughed. "You're barely seventeen! And you think you can defeat one of the most powerful dark wizards this century? You must be crazy!"

"But can't you see that I have to try?" Harry said, leaning forward and pleading with the girl. "This scar has made people expect things from me that have never before been possible. If I can be trained in at least the basics of duelling then I can at least give them a source of hope. Maybe it'll be enough to convince them that if they all team up together against him then he and his followers can be defeated!"

"Team up?" Kat shook her head. "You won't learn anything like that here." she said. "Its every wizard for himself, each striving to get the greatest possible position on the power-hierarchy we have here. It's hard learning. Many don't make it..." She hesitated when she saw the determination in Harry's eyes never wavered and she recalled his words from before. "Maybe you are just like me." She said quietly. "constantly trying to be someone you aren't." she started biting on one of her nails then nodded. "I'll go and find Leo. See what he says. You get some rest and concentrate on getting better. If this is what you really want the you'll need all the strength you can get."

Harry nodded and settled back onto his pillows as she headed for the door. "Kat!" She turned with her hand still on the door handle. "Thanks. I really appreciate it."

She smiled at him sadly and turned to leave. "You won't be thanking me once your training begins." She said quietly and left.

Chapter 12: Remarkable Recovery.

Harry had been bed ridden for two days with only Kat and the occasional visit from Leo as company. He spent most of his waking time thinking about what his friends would be doing back at Hogwarts, and was wondering whether they had set up a search party for him. Every time he thought of this he would end up with a sneer, knowing fully well that they would be searching high and low for the Boy-Who-Lived. And his decision to stay and learn combat was strengthened with these thoughts, his determination to become strong in the eyes of the wizarding world burning hot through his veins.

On more than one occasion he would feel sharp pains rip through the scar on his forehead and he knew that the dark side was searching for him also. He spent his time lying in bed trying to clear his mind in the way Snape had taught him during his Occlumency lessons in an attempt to prevent Voldemort from discovering where he was. Though, after further thought, Harry doubted that the Dark Lord would be able to obtain any information about his whereabouts if Harry, himself, didn't know exactly where he was.

It was early morning when Leo entered with Kat behind him, Harry forced himself into a half sitting position, eagerly awaiting to see if Leo had been able to enrol him as a student at the school.

"Morning, Boy" Leo said calmly. "How are you feeling this morning?"

"A lot better, thanks." Harry said quickly. "The itching seemed to have disappeared during the night and I was able to get a fair bit of rest."

Leo nodded. "Once your scars are healed properly then Kat will be able to bring you downstairs to start your training." He smiled slightly at the look of excitement that appeared on Harry's face. "It seems that the Doyen thinks you would be able to hold yourself well here, though a few introductory lessons would be needed before you will be able to join the mainstream classes."

"Introductory lessons?" Harry asked, sitting forward slightly to allow Kat access to the bandages wrapped tightly around his torso so that they could be changed.

"A few basic skills that should only take around a month to learn, depending, of course, on how hard you work and how easy they come to you."

"What sort of skills?" Harry asked, trying to distract himself from the girl who kept wrapping her arms around his chest in order to remove the bandages.

"We'll have to address the issue of your lack of wand." Leo said, taking a seat on the edge of Harry's bed. "Though that shouldn't be too much of a problem as most of the students here are fully capable of the basics in wandless magic. You'll just have to work harder on the subject as you will be without your wand until you return to your friends."

"Wandless magic? Will I be capable of doing it all the time? I mean, I have done some basic magic, such as breaking glasses and the like when angry. I even caused my Uncle's sister to balloon out once. But to do it all the time? Is it possible?"

Leo shrugged. "It really depends on the wizard." He replied. "Though the Doyen seems to feel that it will come to you with time."

"It seems that this Doyen believes he knows a lot about me." Harry muttered. "Will I get to meet him?"

"Probably not." Leo replied. "He tends to keep himself to himself. Only really deals with those with the highest skill levels."

Harry nodded and looked down to where Kat was still removing the bandages. It wouldn't be much longer, he noticed with relief, before she reached the gauze coverings and would stop putting her arms around him. Then he mentally groaned when he realised that she would have to replace the bandages with fresh afterwards. "So, what else will I learn?" he asked, trying to take his mind off her close proximity.

"Another requirement of the students here is to become an Animagus." Leo said and Harry's eyes gleamed with interest. "Though you will be

able to stay here even if you don't succeed, most students find it better to change their names to suit their animagus form. It gives them a sense of identity and prevents people from discovering too much about their past, if you understand what I mean."

Harry nodded. "Will come in handy with me, huh?" he said with a slight smile and Leo nodded back.

"Maybe." He agreed. "It will certainly prevent them from ripping you to shreds. I'm afraid to say that a lot of the older students, especially those studying under specific masters, find themselves attracted to the possibility of joining Voldemort and his Circle. By keeping your name from them will not prevent them from making assumptions about who you are, but should give you a chance to learn how to defend yourself before they pluck up enough courage to attack you."

Harry frowned slightly. "That sounds promising." He muttered.

"Imagine it like a school full of that ferret-creature you told me about." Kat said with a small smile. Placing the soiled bandages on the bedside table before leaning over to remove the gauze pads. "Never stop watching your back for a second."

"When will all this start?" Harry asked.

"Whenever your scars are healed enough to begin training." Leo said, leaning forward to help Kat gently peel the gauze away from the skin to see how well they were healing.

Harry glanced down when Kat drew in a sharp breath and Leo's eyes opened wide in amazement. Harry, himself, was shocked to see that all his scars had healed, though not entirely disappeared. His skin was criss-crossed with lots of white lines from the knife wounds Avery had inflicted on him. In disbelief, Harry ran his finger along the ridges of a particularly prominent one that ran horizontally across his belly.

"Well." Leo broke the silence and the two teenagers looked up at him. "I think this means that you can start your training earlier than planned, boy." He stood up and headed to the door. "Kat can sort you

out with some clothes and will show you down to the training hall where you will be introduced to your Master.”

“You won’t be training me?” Harry asked in a slightly dazed voice. Leo turned around and shook his head.

“No. Though I won’t be far away if you need me.”

Chapter 13: First Training.

When Harry entered the training room, the first thing he noticed was how large it was. The second thing he noticed was that there was no furniture, and that he appeared to be the only one in there. He turned to ask Kat what he should do next, but with a start he found she was already closing the double doors, a small smile of support on her lips before she disappeared from view.

He looked back around at the room, and gently made his way into the centre of it, turning around slowly so he could get a panoramic view. The room was much more majestic than any of those at Hogwarts. It was the size of a concert hall, with high ceilings and no windows. Light came from a number of flame torches bracketed to the walls. Other than that the walls were bare, as was the stone floor and the dark ceiling. But even with its plainness the room was breathtaking just for its sheer size.

“First lesson!” a voice said sharply interrupting Harry’s inspection of the hall. Harry spun to find himself staring at the tip of a silver blade. “Never make yourself a target!”

Harry followed the slight curve of the sharp weapon with his eyes until they met with the dark gaze of a boy only a couple of years older than himself. He was standing in an offensive pose, the arm holding the blade stretched out with the other hand held high beside his face, his palm facing Harry. His dark brown hair was cut short and was pushed back over his head reminding Harry of the feathers on the head of a bird.

“I’ll bare that in mind” Harry calmly replied, though inside he was seething. The boy before him, though dark haired and dark eyed reminded Harry strongly of Draco Malfoy, and he put the resemblance down to the look in his eyes.

“I mean it, kid.” The boy said, lowering his sword. “The students of this school will not think twice about embedding a knife into that unprotected back of yours.”

Harry nodded. “First lesson learnt.” He said.

The boy turned his head slightly. "We'll see." He said and passed Harry a white belt. "Wear it always," he said. "It informs the other students here that you are not yet sword trained. It should give you half of a chance."

"Why don't I like the way you said that?" Harry asked as he tied the belt around his waist.

"As I said." The boy replied. "It'll give you half a chance."

Harry's tutor sat himself down in the middle of the large room, sitting on his heels. "My name is Horus, a name derived from my animagus form of a Hawk." Harry mentally congratulated himself on recognising the similarities between the boy and his animagus form as he too took a seat on the floor. "The first thing you are going to learn is how to become an Animagus. From there we will be able to give you a name."

"My name is Harry."

"Using your own name isn't safe here. It provides too many links to the past. Too many people will make connections and you will be the one who comes off worse. It would be best if you forgot your past for the time being."

"Maybe I don't want to forget who I am." Harry said. "I didn't come here by choice."

"How do you know that?" Horus replied. "From what I've been told you apparated here, and to apparate you need be able to visualise a destination in your mind. You couldn't've just arrived here by accident, especially after your...friend did not arrive with you."

Harry glared at his tutor. "Look, let's just get on with it. The sooner I do this the sooner I can get back and make sure that my friends are okay. I don't want to stay here any longer than I have to"

"In such a hurry." The boy smirked, reminding Harry more and more of Malfoy. "You can't rush these things, kid. And if you want to train

here then it is going to be rather a long time before you see your friends again.”

Harry stared at him. “How long?”

Horus shrugged. “Depends on your determination.” He said. “But don’t mix determination with rushing. It’ll just make everything take a lot longer. I suspect at least a year.”

“A year! They’ll all be dead by then!”

“Then maybe you should shut up and pay attention.” Horus rose smoothly from the floor. “I shall return in a couple of hours when you have calmed yourself enough to listen to what I say. Remember, you are the one who is in a hurry to get out of here, and to do that you will have to prove to us that you are ready. I have all the time in the world, and don’t you forget that, kid.” The young master made his way across the room to the door.

“My name is Harry!” Harry shouted at the retreating figure. At the door, Horus turned around and shook his head.

“Not here it isn’t.” His quiet voice carried across the vast room, and before Harry could get to his feet to shout back he had gone, shutting the door behind him.

Harry looked around the room he was in, looking for something to let his anger out on. When he saw that there was nothing he screamed in frustration, slamming his fist into the floor before he pushed himself up and walked stiffly to the door.

Behind him, the old man walked from the corner shadows over to where the boy had been sitting and looked at the deep dent that had been left in the stone floor by his fist. He smiled slightly, gently rubbing his foot against stone and feeling the power that emanated from it. It was only a matter of time.

Chapter 14: Second lesson

"This school has been around for centuries, many say that it is even older than your beloved Hogwarts. But it has always been kept a secret, simply because it goes against what other schools see as a fitting academic curriculum."

"What do you mean?" Harry asked. He had calmed down since the morning and was once more sitting cross-legged on the stone floor in the middle of the immense training hall. In front of him sat his "tutor" who knelt on the floor, sitting on his heels. Harry had tried this position for a while, but the hard stone floor had soon deadened all feeling to his feet and he had reverted to sitting Indian-styli.

"We teach things here that many schools feel should be forgotten." Horus explained. "We know many of the ancient magics, have the ability to train those gifted with wandless magic, and encourage the learning of more artistic skills such as combat and duelling."

"Is that why everyone here carries a sword?"

Horus nodded. "Swords play an important part at this school. At each level you are tested on your ability with a sword, and you progress your way higher by defeating another above you. The ultimate goal is to become the Doyen."

"Doyen?"

"He would be equivalent of your headmaster. He has defeated many, and will only lose his seat once he has been defeated. You may challenge him at anytime, as long as it is in the presence of at least one other to ensure that the title is passed on fairly." He shrugged slightly. "Of course, that rule isn't always applicable, as one of the swordsmen would have to be unable to continue in order for the other to be declared the victor. In the more advanced fights where there is more talent and a lot more to lose this usually means that one of the pair will die, making it hard to find a replacement if the superior dies in suspicious circumstances."

"Sounds dangerous." Harry said.

Horus smirked. "You would rather your safe exams back at Hogwarts?"

Harry looked the boy in the eye and nodded. "I would rather be there any day." He said. "This place sounds like it has no love. Everyone would be suspicious of an attack; you would never be able to let your guard down."

Horus stared back at him quietly for a time. "That is how this school runs." He said in a monotone. "It trains you to be alert, ready for battle at any time. It builds stamina and makes you strong."

This reminded Harry of the "constant vigilance" outbursts given by Professor Moody at Hogwarts the year before, and he shook his head. "But, not being able to relax, not being able to laugh, that is no way to live." Harry repeated.

Horus shrugged. "It is what we choose. It is why we are here. And you cannot deny that we are not the best."

"You're only the best because there is no one else who works in this way!" Harry shouted, leaning forward.

"You really have to work on that temper, kid. It'll will get you nothing but trouble here."

Harry leant back again, taking deep breaths to calm himself. "I just want to get back to my friends." He said quietly when he felt the pressure in his chest subside.

Horus nodded. "I understand. And I feel the sooner we get started the sooner you can get back to them. As I said before, the first thing to do is to become an animagus. The basis of transforming is simple in theory. But in practise it takes a lot of effort and concentration, at least until you get used your form. The first step is to concentrate on an animal of your choice. Most animagi find that their chosen animal will appear in your mind with clarity of detail. You will be able to sense how that animal will move and behave in your mind."

Harry frowned a little, thinking through a number of animals he had seen when he had visited the zoo with Dudley all those years before. "If you could imagine more than one animal with clarity, does that mean you can turn into whatever animal you like?"

"Within reason" Horus replied. "Multianimagi are very rare. More than likely you will find it hard to concentrate on how another animal will feel once you have experienced your primary form. Most multianimagi are only able form into other members of their chosen species, such as various forms of cat, or a variety of birds."

"What about magical creatures?" Harry asked, closing his eyes and thinking of the headmaster's phoenix, Fawkes.

Horus shook his head. "Unheard of." He replied. "In theory, and with a lot of observation and research, it may be possible to turn into the form of a magical creature. But their powers would be impossible to imitate."

Harry shook his head slightly, remembering how Fawkes had balanced himself on the perch in the headmaster's office. How he had burst into flame on his burning day and emerged from the ash moments later. How he had flown in the Chamber of Secrets in Harry's second year, attacking the basilisk's eyes and then fluttered down to Harry and cried on his arm to heal the wound the basilisk's tooth had left there. All the memories were presented with such clarity in Harry's mind that he could almost hear the rustle of the wind in the feathers on the phoenix's back, and his song filled the air around him, warming his heart and creating a sense of calm that made Harry smile.

Horus let his mouth fall open in surprise as the boy began to glow in front of him. The temperature radiating from the boys body rose, and Horus could see a small smile appear on the boy's lips. He looked over to the corner where he knew his master to be standing in the shadows, but the man shook his head slightly, not wanting to step forward and interrupt the training session.

Horus nodded and looked back at the boy. The smile on his face had grown and the tutor felt a warm breeze appear around him.

“Hey! Kid!” he said loudly and Harry’s eyes snapped open. The heat disappeared and the breeze stopped. “I want you to sit there and think of your animal. Examine everything about it. Then picture in your mind what it would feel like to be that animal. If it is the right choice then you will be able to feel your body start to change. The problem with most wizards is that they don’t like the feel of this change. It scares them. And often the first few transformations are rather painful, as your body will not be used to the change. Don’t try and fight the feeling, it’ll only hurt more and make the transformation last longer. Have faith in yourself and if you are lucky you may be able to change your nails into talons, or grow fur on your hands on your first attempt.”

“You want me to try today?” Harry asked in disbelief. “But it took my father nearly three years to learn how to do it!”

“Do you question my ability to teach?” Horus asked.

“No – but...”

“Close your eyes.” The young tutor interrupted. “Relax, try and imagine your creature in your head. It’ll take time, and don’t worry if we don’t get anywhere today.”

Harry nodded slightly and closed his eyes. He pushed the image of Fawkes to the back of his mind and concentrated on the animals he had seen at the zoo. His mind passed the reptile house where he had set the snake on his cousin, but he knew he didn’t really want to become a reptile. Whereas he had nothing against the creatures, they did remind him a lot of Voldemort’s flat face, with red eyes and scaly skin and he felt he didn’t need a reminder of the dark lord’s physical characteristics every time he transformed.

He walked through the zoo in his mind and moved to the aviary. The air filled with hundreds of brightly coloured birds, and a chorus of screeches and whistles filled the air. At one point Harry was sure he saw Fawkes sitting in the middle of the birds of paradise, but the image disappeared and he moved on. There was just too much of a choice, with feathers flying everywhere and Harry felt that he wouldn’t

be able to produce a picture with enough clarity to be able to transform.

His memory then took him through to the larger pens of the mammals. He passed cats of various sizes, and stopped at the wolf enclosure. He knelt down and gently placed his hand against the wire fencing that ran around the enclosure. A pair of woody yellow eyes stared at him as the wolf became aware of his presence. The wolf stepped forward a few paces until he was standing in front of the young wizard. Harry felt strangely calm and smiled as the wolf's nose gently touched his hand. His mental self closed his eyes as his fingers felt the soft hairs on the wolf's muzzle and he began to imagine what it would feel like to run like the wind with the other wolves in a pack, and another smile crossed his face as a slight breeze brushed his hair across his forehead.

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"It's not going to take him long at all." Leo muttered. He was watching Horus and the boy sitting in the middle of the room and was standing by his master in the shadowy corner. He had just watched the boy raise his arms and outstretch his fingers as if to touch something.

"I never expected it to." The Doyen replied. "Once he transforms successfully, start immediately on wandless magic."

Leo looked at him in confusion. "Master? Are you sure? This is his first lesson."

"He has no wand. He will need to know how to perform magic for the next classes. I want him in the combat classes by the end of the month."

Leo looked at him in shock. "But he is barely sixteen. Those classes are full of brutes. Without any extra training he'll die within a week."

The Doyen shook his head. "No." he said quietly. "He won't." he started moving towards the door. "Let me know what animal he chooses. Keep working him hard. He doesn't have much time."

Leo looked back at the boy and watched as a flicker of doubt crossed the boy's young face and his outstretched hand jerked back slightly, away from whatever he had reached out to touch. Horus once more glanced his way but Leo ignored the questioning look he was sent and continued to watch the boy's his facial expressions as they relaxed as if in sleep. He settled himself for a long wait.

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In his mind Harry heard a noise behind him, and his eyes snapped open as he turned away from the wolf. His eyes connected with a pair of glowing yellow eyes staring at him from the cage on the other side of the path. Harry scooted across the path on his knees and stared at magnificent creature in front of him. It was a panther. His eyes hungrily devoured the sleek black fur, the long whiskers around the muzzle and the powerful muscles that rippled under its skin. On closed inspection he could see the darker circles on its coat that confirmed his relation to the leopard, but its height was taller than its cousin and its tail whipped from side to side as the black cat returned the boys gaze.

Harry once more shut his eyes and concentrated on the creature in front of him. A low rumble like a motor came from the feline in front of him, and the boy's smile widened to a grin as he felt his muscles begin to stretch under his skin, the feeling of physical power increasing as his bones began to crack out of shape. The pain was intense, but Harry's breaths became short with anticipation as he felt his body transform.

Chapter 15: Multianimagi

The next morning Harry returned to the training room, running through the corridors as a black panther and relishing the feel of the tight feline muscles that ran through his body.

He entered the large room to find Horus already sitting cross-legged in the middle of the room, his dark eyes closed lightly. Harry quickly transformed, the process a lot less painful now he had completed it a number of times and waited patiently for his tutor to speak.

"I may not be the most experienced of tutors you have come across, mostly due to my age, and it is because of this I sought counsel from some of my superiors last night. It has been suggested to me that you may have the potential for becoming a very strong wizard." Harry sat quiet, a little unsure of how to respond to such a comment without sounding pig-headed. Horus sat in silence for nearly a full minute before speaking again. "Tell me, what went through your mind when you transformed yesterday?"

Harry thought for a couple of moments before describing the zoo he had visited with the Dursleys the summer before he had gone to Hogwarts, and his mental recollection of the animals there, including the wolf and finally the black panther.

"And you say you could sense the detail of the wolf almost as clearly as you could the panther?"

Harry nodded. "Down to the wind blowing in its fur" he said.

"I want you to close your eyes and picture that wolf." Horus said and Harry obeyed. "Concentrate on the look in its eye, the way it moves.... And I want you to try and transform."

Harry's eyes snapped open. "But haven't we already discovered my animagus form?"

"I briefly mentioned yesterday the rare talent of multianimagi. And I don't see there's any harm in seeing whether or not you possess this talent. Now most Multianiamgi are only able to turn into various

breeds of their particular species of animal. For example, one Multianimagus I have heard of can transform into two different species of cat such as the household tabby and a lion. Occasionally you do come across a witch or wizard who can perform cross-species transformations. And as your wolf is a canine and your panther is a feline..."

Harry nodded in understanding and took a deep breath, steadying his excitement before shutting his eyes. He pictured once more the proud wolf as it stood on the other side of the fence. By placing his fingers through the wire mesh and touching the smooth fur, Harry was almost able to feel the wind blowing through it.

With a painful shudder, Harry once more felt his bones and muscles contort themselves. And when he finally opened his eyes he found himself sitting on his haunches, grey/black fur thickly covering his canine hide.

Horus nodded. "As I suspected. You may turn back now, kid, and practise other forms in your spare time."

Harry hesitated before he did so. Relishing the feel of stamina and boundless energy that coursed through his veins. He felt he could start off at a lope and continue to run for days. It was almost as if the forest was calling for him to run their paths, but he resisted the urge and turned back. Sitting, once more in front of his cross-legged tutor.

"Now, I want you to tell me why you asked about possibility of magical- animagi transformations yesterday."

Harry frowned, thinking back to the image of Fawkes which had jumped into his mind as soon as Horus had mentioned becoming an Animagus. "I once knew a phoenix." He started to explain, briefly shutting his eyes. "And when you told me to concentrate on the finer details of an animal I felt I could remember everything about him. The way he flew, the way he sang. I even remember seeing him on a burning day."

Horus nodded slightly. "This has never been done before, and I personally think it's a pointless exercise. However, I have been asked to help you attempt a transformation into a phoenix."

Harry's mouth dropped open. "But you said..."

"I know what I said, kid." Horus interrupted and he let his stony gaze disappear long enough for Harry to notice an excited glint sparkle in his eyes. "But I am not much older than you are, and I don't claim to know everything. You have already shown that you are more talented than most by completing cross-species transformations" Harry shook his head uncertainly. "Look, whereas the transformation into a magical animal has never been done does not mean it's impossible. It probably just relies on the magical prowess of the witch or wizard attempting the transformation. What is common knowledge is that most people find that the first animal they think of when attempting a transformation is usually that animal they will become. As most people immediately picture an everyday animal such as a household pet they usually never recognise their full potential. But, as the first animal to enter your mind was a phoenix, I am willing to bet that you'd be able to take the form, even if you are incapable of mimicking it's unique form of magic. You could be a breakthrough in the wizarding world!"

Harry rolled his eyes slightly at his tutor's words. "As if I need more fame." He muttered. But Horus had dropped all pretence of being indifferent and Harry was spurred on to try by the eagerness etched into the face before him.

He once more took a deep breath and closed his eyes. Almost instantly the image of Fawkes popped into his head. Sitting on his usual perch in Dumbledore's office he was pruning his magnificent red/gold feathers, ruffling them in a proud way as he started to sing a soft song that caused a warm glow to pass through Harry's body as the image in his head began to change.

Fawkes' red/gold feathers began to take on a paler hue, taking on a shade of yellow whilst their tips began to turn black. His size increased by a couple of inches and his song grew louder as he

stretched his magnificent wings, admiring himself from every angle as he stared out with his cobalt eyes.

Black eyes. Harry blinked, suddenly aware that his own eyes were open and the image of the phoenix had not disappeared. He was looking into a mirror conjured up by Horus and the transformation had already happened, this time without the pain caused by his skeleton and muscles rearranging themselves. This transformation had happened totally without his awareness, almost as if the phoenix had been a part of him and had just decided to show itself.

Harry trilled again, and with a couple of flaps of his great wings took off from the floor to soar through the air of the great training hall, his ears full of the excited laughing from the boy standing in the middle of the hall below him. After a couple of laps of the hall he landed back on the ground and transformed back.

“Wow.” Horus said, reaching forward and grabbing Harry’s hand, pumping it hard. “Truly amazing.” Harry grinned, a little short of breath and Horus placed his hand on his shoulder. “Go rest.” He said. “I need to go and talk to some people about this. Tomorrow we shall explore your form a little more, to see exactly what you are capable of. And after that we can start some wandless magic, though, after seeing you change like that I doubt that it will take you long to pick up.”

Harry nodded again, his eyes closing slightly as a wave of tiredness hit him. “Here.” He looked down to see a large book had appeared in his tutor’s hand. “It’s a book on what we know about phoenix. Most of it is speculation, though, if you feel up to it, maybe you’d like to work your way through it and see if any of it applies to you.”

Harry nodded quickly, his eyes opening wide as he glanced down at the book and noticed the author. “Dumbledore!” he exclaimed.

“You know him?” Horus asked.

“Sure,” Harry said with a smile. “He’s the headmaster at Hogwarts.”

Horus nodded. "Then work through it, see if it will help you discover what you are capable of." Harry nodded and grinned once more before heading for the door to the hall. Horus grinned as he watched the animagus leave and soon felt a hand on his shoulder.

"What happened to the harsh teaching techniques that you were so eager to master?" Leo spoke quietly.

Horus shrugged. "I guess you have to make some exceptions with special students. Some learn better with friendly support rather than hostility." He looked at his master. "I assume that you are going to take over his training now that his animagus form has come to light?"

Leo shook his head. "No. You continue with the wandless magic. I think you two are well matched. You might even make a friend out of him."

Horus chuffed a little and shook his head. "A friend? In this place? Would be hard to believe." He looked back to the door that Harry had walked through. "Though he is a good kid. Great potential as well. I'd just be glad to know that I helped with his training."

Leo nodded. "Then continue," he said, walking away. "Just keep me posted on his progress."

"Of course." Horus replied, then called after his master. "Hey, Leo. What about his name?"

Leo paused for a second, his back still facing the young tutor. "Pyro," he replied and then continued out the door.

Horus thought for a few seconds then nodded, a smile appearing on his face before he transformed into a magnificent eagle and soared out of the open door.

Chapter 16: The vision.

Harry smiled at the slight tap on his door, and he proceeded to open with it with a slight movement of his hand from where he was sitting at the desk.

“Morning, Pi” Kat said as she walked in. “And how are you this fine evening?”

“Not too bad.” Harry replied. “Yourself?”

The past week had passed quickly, with regular morning lessons with Horus on how to control wandless magic and spending the afternoons reading through various books that the tutor gave him in order to expand his knowledge of charms and incantations. Harry had been amazed when he became aware of how much more could be achieved without being hindered by a wand, and had quickly mastered many charms that he had had problems with at Hogwarts.

This afternoon was his first chance to have any time off, and Kat had suggested that she took him on a more detailed tour of the school seeing he hadn’t investigated much more than his own room and the training hall. Harry had accepted with a grin, and now stood up to follow the blonde girl out of his room, turning left rather than his habitual right to the training hall.

“Feeling pretty good.” Kat replied, easily interlocking her arm with his. “You seem pretty chirpy today, I must say. Either you mastered the art of opening doors without moving your hand or something else is on your mind.” Harry blushed slightly and dropped his head as they walked down the plain white corridor causing Kat to laugh. “I guess it wasn’t the hand movement thing then.” She said.

Harry shook his head. “Though I have limited myself to only performing a slight flick.” He said, defending himself. “Its easier to perform some sort of initiating action. It helps focus what I want to do.”

Kat nodded slightly. “So why are you so happy?” she asked. “You’ve always come across as being the quiet, broody sort before.”

Harry shrugged. "I deserve some time off from being broody." He said. "It is my birthday."

Kat stopped in the hall and turned to him, giving him a quick hug. "You should've told me sooner." She said. "Happy birthday."

"Thanks," Harry replied, quickly returning the hug before they pushed through the doors at the end of the corridor. "So, what have you got planned to show me?"

Kat shrugged. "I figured we could save most of the inside viewing until later, there isn't much to see outside once it gets dark. So I thought I'd just show you some of the woods, the amphitheatre and the library."

"What's the library doing outside?"

"Its not. Its just so big that it has a building all to itself."

Harry's eyebrows rose a little. "I have a friend who would give anything to see that," he said and Kat laughed.

"I very much doubt he'd get the chance." She said. "Not unless he was an amazing scholar and able to cope with the physical side of being here."

Harry took a deep breath as they walked outside, his eyes hungrily taking in the tall trees that surrounded the massive school building and the late afternoon sunlight shining down on them. "She is a great scholar." He said, feeling slightly dizzy as the fresh air hit his lungs. "Could quote the page number of everything she's ever read if you gave her half the chance. Though I think the fitness thing would probably throw her. I imagine that would be more Ron's forte."

Kat nodded slightly and headed off down a path. Within a few minutes Harry became aware of a lot of shouting and the sound of metal against metal as they neared a very large circular stone building.

“This is the amphitheatre.” Kat explained, climbing up some stairs that made their way up the outside wall. “This is where most of the physical training is held; they tend to set up tough training exercises and the like here. Though sometimes the hall in the main building is used. And there are also some smaller training rooms in the building behind the library.”

Harry followed her up the stairs and gasped when they reached the top. The top of the amphitheatre was about the same height as the crowd stands on Hogwarts’ Quidditch pitch. The floor of the amphitheatre was almost the same size as well, though instead of being covered in grass it was covered in a layer of sand over a sturdy wooden floor. The floor itself had many markings on it, which Kat went on to explain was to help the students place themselves during fights.

“Are these all the students?” Harry asked, watching around thirty pairs of young men face up against one another and practise sparring. Every now and then he could see one of the Masters walk up to a pair and adjust the grip or alter the stance of one of the combatants before moving away on their rounds.

“Most of them.” Kat replied. “Some might be excused to conduct more research, and more than likely there will be a few in the main hospital wing. It isn’t very often that we have mass practises like this, though. Mostly classes are held in ability levels. As soon as you master one level – usually by defeating another in a duel – you can then move up to the next where you will learn a new skill and so on.”

Harry nodded. “Until you become Doyen, right?”

Kat smirked slightly. “Most people settle for becoming a plain Master.” She said. “Not many people ever attempt to battle the Doyen, he has an unfair advantage over most.” She turned and Harry followed her back down the stairs.

“Why? Can he do something that no one else can?” he asked.

“I don’t really know.” Kat replied. “I have only met him a few times, and Leo has never told me. I’m assuming it’s something you wouldn’t

want to mess with though, else he would've lost his position years ago."

"How come?"

"He's really old. I know both Leo and my father think he will probably die of old age before someone ever beats him. He always has an uncanny habit of falling on his feet during duels."

"A bit like a certain feline I know." Harry said with a sly smile. Kat returned the grin and turned into her animagus form of a snow leopard, it's white fur a sharp contrast to that of Harry's panther form as he raced her to the library.

The library caused Harry to stand in shock, his mouth open as his eyes took in the sight before them. Rows upon rows of large tomes stretched before him and above him, filling the large room that would rival the Hogwarts school library's size three times over.

"You guys actually have time to read these?" Harry asked, running slightly to catch up with Kat as she made her way down the main aisle.

She laughed and nodded. "It's important to keep up the theory of why magic works the way it does as well as just doing it. For example, I'm sure Horus has shown you that wandless magic can be used much faster than that initiated by a wand and also it can be much more powerful?"

"Yes. He told me that using the wand is a "lazy" way of performing magic, as the strength of the magic it produces seldom varies and the added magical core means that it doesn't take much out of the wizard using it. He also said that most wandless magic had to do with will power, and relies more on what you want it to do rather than on the incantation used to create it."

Kat nodded again. "But it does have its limits. Whereas it is possible to transfigure things with wandless magic, it is necessary to use a wand to conjure things, such as making fire appear. It is also affected greatly by your moods and emotions and can often get out of hand.

That's probably why wands were introduced in the first place. It takes a lot of time and concentration to be able to control wandless magic safely. Because of that all these books are both relevant to both wand related and wandless magic."

"I haven't seen anything like most of these books." Harry said as he picked up a random book off the shelf and flipped through its pages, glancing over the sketches that depicted the production of wandless protection shields. "They have nothing like this at Hogwarts."

"Of course they wouldn't." Kat said. "They focus entirely on the ability to use a wand. It was decided many years ago that wandless magic was entirely too unpredictable and therefore too dangerous. Eventually people began to forget that it even existed, other than when people get real upset over something and their emotions get the better of them."

Harry nodded. "I once blew my Aunt Marge up once when she insulted my father." He said. "I just saw red, next thing I know she had ballooned up and was floating to the ceiling."

Kat laughed and Harry held up the book. "Is it okay if I borrow this?" he asked.

"Sure, that's what they are here for. Don't worry about signing it out or anything, these are for general reading and its not like you can take it anywhere off the grounds. The only ones you need to take permission to remove are those from downstairs."

"What's kept down there?"

"My! Aren't we inquisitive?" Kat grinned slightly and started for the main doors again before answering. "Mainly books that can't be replaced, such as the very old ones. There are also a couple of very intense dark magic books down there."

"Do you have to get permission to read them?"

"No, but they can't be taken off the premises. The collection is probably one of the most valuable in the wizarding world, and so

there are more protective wards here than anywhere. For example, it is impossible to start a fight in here, in case a bit of stray magic hits one of the books by accident.”

“Sounds good to me.” Harry said. “Once my training starts I’ll be sheltering in here for the majority of the time then.”

Kat laughed again. “Probably the safest option.” She said. “Plus it wouldn’t hurt to get a little more knowledge under your belt. The more you know the more of an advantage you have over your opponent.”

Harry nodded and looked at the thick book in his hand. “I guess knowledge really is power.” He said and Kat nodded.

“How’s things going with the phoenix book?” she asked.

Harry shrugged, a small smile twitching at the corner of his mouth. “For such an amazing guy, Dumbledore doesn’t really know all that much about phoenixes.” He said.

Kat frowned. “How come?” she asked. “Horus told me that it was the most informed book he could find about phoenix and how they can do what they do.”

Harry shrugged. “But it’s all based on observations. He has no idea what actually goes on inside the mind of a phoenix. And because of that I’m finding it hard to do anything that Fawkes can.”

Kat wrapped her arms around her chest as the cold air hit them as they stepped from the library. Even though Harry had noticed that the day-time temperatures were a lot warmer here than at Hogwarts the nights still got very cold, suggesting that Marcello wasn’t located in England. “Have you thought that the reason for that could be that you aren’t capable of what a normal phoenix can do?”

Harry thought for a moment before shaking his head. “But I know I can.” He said. “I don’t know how I know, but I do. Its like, when I’m in phoenix form, the magic inside me feels different. It feels like it should work differently from normal magic. I think that’s why Dumbledore’s

theories are so wrong. He's taken it all from a wizard's point of view, not one of a phoenix."

"But is it possible to change as completely as that?" Kat asked. "Most animagus keep an element of themselves when they transform. Same memories, same abilities." She laughed slightly. "Some even take on the same physical characteristics."

Harry smiled with her, remembering the way Sirius had resembled that of the large dog he transformed into with his long black hair that constantly fell across his face. "I don't know." He shrugged, trying to push the memory from his mind. "I don't know if that's what happens, but I do know how it feels. Its almost as if it's the other way around, like I'm taking on the characteristics of a phoenix rather than the phoenix taking on mine "

Kat stopped walking and looked at him, noticing the change in Harry's voice. "How so?"

Harry thought for a few moments. He had noticed plenty of little changes that had occurred since he had mastered the phoenix animagus form, the most major of which being the fact he no longer needed glasses. But, he mused with a small smile, he hadn't needed glasses since he had arrived at the Marcello school, and it had taken him until after the transformation to realise this. But most of them were internal changes, such as the sense of calm that had replaced the anger and hurt he had felt the previous year, though he couldn't be sure whether that was entirely due to the transformation or just growing up. "Here," he said after a few minutes, and reached out to take Kat's hand. The girl looked at him warily with one eyebrow raised. "Notice anything?"

Kat looked down at where their hands touched then angled her head to one side. She let go of his hand and reached up to touch the side of his face. "You're warm," she said in amazement. "Not just warm hands, but unnaturally warm"

Harry nodded. "And a phoenix is a bird of flames." He reminded her gently.

Kat's eyes opened in realisation. "Well, maybe you can give your headmaster a run for his money, and write a book about what actually goes on in the mind of a phoenix." She said with a small smile, hesitantly removing her hand from Harry's cheek.

Harry nodded slightly, and his smile widened as she linked arms with him and headed off to the main school building. "Where are we going now?" he asked.

"I thought I'd show you the inside of the main building." She said. "Whereas you may have some sort of internal heating system, it is getting a bit chilly out here for us mere mortals, and it'll be dark soon. Besides, we've seen most of everything. You can go exploring properly some other time and the only other place you really need to know is the location of the boys' dormitories, which are just around the back of the school. That will be where you will stay once you have finished training with Horus."

Harry nodded. "It's going to be strange sharing with people I don't know." He said. "I've kinda got used to Neville's snores over the past few years."

Kat nodded. "I'm sure you'll get used to it. There is an unwritten rule that a students shouldn't attack one another in the dormitories, though I won't pretend that there haven't been a few scuffles now and then."

Harry groaned. "Doesn't the competitiveness in this place ever end?" he asked.

"Nope." Kat replied, pausing on the steps of the main building. "As I'm sure Horus keeps telling you, it's the way things are run here. It may not be nice or moral but its how things are. You'll just have to get used to it."

Harry nodded and placed his foot on the step to follow Kat up to the main doors when a sharp pain flashed across his forehead, causing him to fall to his knees with a sharp gasp.

“Pi?” Kat jumped down the couple of steps she had climbed to kneel by his side. “Pi! What’s the matter? Tell me what’s wrong.”

Harry barely heard her as his vision blurred. He pressed his hands firmly against his forehead as the image of the school before him began to disappear, being replaced by a familiar room with a circle of dark-hooded wizards around it.

“Is everything ready, Lucius?” Harry watched as one of the Death Eaters stepped forward, dropping his head in a courteous bow before replying.

“Yes, my Lord. We are all ready to apparate on your command.”

Voldemort nodded, coming into Harry’s field of vision as he walked into the centre of the circle. “Hopefully this attack will come as a complete surprise now that certain leaks have been taken care of.” He looked over his circle. “I want you all to remember your orders. All inhabitants may be killed except for the father and the youngest son. Those two will be brought back here to me to be questioned. You will then search the house for any sign of the Potter boy. I want to hear if you find anything, no matter how little, that may suggest where he is. Is that understood?” There was a general nodding of cloaked heads before Voldemort clapped his hands and rubbed them together. “Very well.” He said. “Go to the apparating point and leave. Make sure that the attack on the Burrow is not as much of a disaster as your previous missions.”

Harry gasped and blinked his eyes as he focused back on the school towering high above him.

“Pi! Pyro? Can you hear me?”

“Pi?”

Harry’s eyes flickered slightly, and he rolled over onto his hands and knees to retch as the implications of what he had just seen hit him.

“Pyro? You okay?” Harry looked up weakly to see Leo leaning over him; Kat was kneeling beside him looking pale and worried. “What happened?”

“Voldemort.” Harry said, holding his stomach and willing himself not to vomit again. “I’ve just had a vision of Voldemort. He’s going to attack my friend Ron’s house.” He looked desperately at Leo. “I have to warn them.”

Leo shook his head sadly. “There is no contact to the outside world here, Pyro.” He said. “I’m sorry to hear about your friend, but there isn’t anything we can do.”

Harry shook his head. “But he’s going to kill them. There must be some way to get word to them. What about Floo powder? A telephone? Anything?”

Leo shook his head again, and Harry fell back against the step, his head pounding as he tried to think of a way to warn his friends about the oncoming attack. After a few moments of thinking, his eyes snapped open. “I need some parchment and a quill.”

“How are you planning on getting it to them?” Leo asked as Kat immediately transfigured two rocks into what Harry needed, passing them over to him and he began to quickly scratch out a message.

“Phoenix mail.” Harry said. “I’ve seen messages delivered by Fawkes, my headmaster’s phoenix. Though there isn’t much on it in that book Horus gave me I am assuming that it works along the lines of apparation.” He quickly finished the letter and signed it before transforming into his phoenix form.

He took the letter into one of his claws and silently willed it to go to Ron. When it didn’t move he let out a frustrated cry, and almost immediately the claw that had wrapped itself around the parchment grew warm. Harry trilled again, closing his eyes and willing the parchment to disappear. When he next looked down he saw with relief that the parchment had gone, and he transformed back, falling against Leo as exhaustion took over.

Chapter 17: Attack on the Burrow.

Ron sat on his bed and stared at his feet. The disappearance of his best friend had weighed heavily in his chest since he had heard about the attack on Privet Drive, but had come back with a vengeance that day due to it being his friend's birthday.

Dumbledore had called another meeting of the Order, once more inviting Ron and Hermione to sit in, but no new information had been found and Remus had looked dejected to admit that there had been no word from Harry.

The return to the Burrow had been quick via the Floo network, but the usual bustle of the Weasley household was missing and the family had spent the evening sitting quietly in the living room, staring into the flames of the open fire and each lost to his or her own thoughts.

Even though he was worried for his friend's safety, Ron could not help but think back to those few hours spent in front of the fire, where he had sat with his arm wrapped comfortably around Hermione as silent tears rolled down her face. He had walked her up to Ginny's room when Molly has insisted that they all went to bed, and he was slightly shocked when Hermione grabbed him in a tight embrace before kissing him quickly on the cheek and muttering a quick "thank you" before disappearing into the room with his sister. As far as he was aware, Hermione was still the same girl that he had first met on the train to Hogwarts in their first year and nothing more than a friend. Yet that embrace had felt...good.

He smiled a little then the memory of Harry popped into his thoughts of Hermione and he wondered what his friend would think if he asked Hermione out. Ron hit head hand against his forehead and screwed up his face. "What am I doing?" he asked himself through clenched teeth. "My best mate is probably being tortured to death and I'm thinking about Hermione!"

Suddenly, he heard a soft popping sound and turned to his left to see a red-gold feather float onto his pillow and beside it lay a note on thick parchment. Instantly, Ron thought of the parchment that had brought him news of his father that time in Grimmauld Place.

He grabbed at the parchment thinking it contained some news about Harry, but he wasn't prepared for what had been hastily scribbled in black ink.

Ron. It's Harry. I really hope this gets to you in time. You must get out of the Burrow. I've just had one of those visions and there are a load of Death Eaters headed your way. I know that these dreams aren't always reliable, especially after the ministry, but it can't hurt to be safe can it? Please get everyone out. Stay safe. Harry.

Ron read the message through three times before he completely registered what was written there. Within moments he was running down the stairs, banging on his sister's bedroom door and shouting at her and Hermione to get up as he passed. He met his parents as they stuck their head out of the kitchen door to find out what the noise was all about.

"We have to get out of here." Ron shouted, pushing them back into the kitchen. He thrust the letter into his father's hands whilst still racing for the fireplace and the pot of floo powder.

"What is this?" Arthur Weasley asked.

"It's in Harry's handwriting." Ron said holding the pot out to his mother. "We have to get out of here."

"Harry's handwriting?" Ron turned to see Hermione and his sister standing by the door, both in the pyjamas.

"He's had another vision. About Death Eaters heading here to attack the Burrow."

"But his last dream got you into all that trouble at the ministry." Molly said.

"But his first saved my life." Arthur said without hesitation. He quickly came to a decision and took the pot of floo powder off his wife. He held it out to his daughter. "Order headquarters, now!" he ordered and Ginny took a handful of the dust obediently, throwing it into the

fire before clearly announcing the address of the headquarters. Hermione and Molly Weasley quickly followed her, leaving Ron and his father in the kitchen.

Arthur Weasley was just handing the pot to his son when there was a bright flash of red light through the half-shuttered windows.

"They're here." Arthur hissed before thrusting a handful of the dust into Ron's hand and pushing him into the fireplace. Ron trembled when he heard the shouts from outside and the building began to shake as he threw the powder into the flames at his feet and spoke the address as clearly as he could. "Number twelve, Grimmauld place."

He stumbled slightly as he fell from the fireplace at the other end of his nauseous journey. "They're there." He gasped, spinning around to watch his father stumble from the fire, lines of worry creasing his forehead.

"We need to call Dumbledore." Arthur said grimly.

"No need." A familiar voice replied and the Weasleys and Hermione spun to see the headmaster standing in the doorway with Kingsley Shacklebolt, Tonks and Remus Lupin just behind him.

"Albus, just the person! What are you still doing here?"

"We were upstairs discussing the possibility of approaching some other ministry workers to become Order members." Tonks replied. "Why did you come back? Is everything okay?"

The group all turned to where Ron was standing next to his father looking pale under his freckles.

"Death eaters arrived at the Burrow." Arthur explained. "If it hadn't been for Ron and his letter from Harry I doubt we would've made it out of the house in time. They were cursing the place as I left."

Molly let out a gasp and her hands flew to her mouth as Remus stepped forward. "Harry? He contacted you?"

Ron nodded slightly and held the scribbled note out to Dumbledore's outstretched hand who then proceeded to read aloud the letter.

"How did you get this?" he asked Ron when he had finished.

"Phoenix feather." He replied, opening his left palm that still gripped the slightly rumpled feather tightly. "I assumed it was one of Fawkes'..."

Dumbledore pushed his moon-shaped glasses further up his nose, took the feather from Ron's hand and gently examined it under the light. "This is not one of Fawkes." His words caused the others in the room to send questioning glances to one another. "See here, the colour is much more golden than the feather's from Fawkes, which tend to be more reddish. And there is a tint of black at the tip...definitely not one of Fawkes'."

"Then whose bird does it belong to?" Molly asked, wrapping her arms around Ginny. "Surely if we locate the bird's owner then we'll be able to find Harry."

"But couldn't it have been taken from a wild phoenix?" Ginny asked.

Dumbledore shook his head. "Wild phoenix are very rare and extremely solitary creatures. I doubt Harry would have found one let alone been able to tame it in the time he has been missing. I can only assume that this has come from a tame bird and that Harry is in the company of someone who has given him permission to use this method of communication."

"Which must mean that he's with someone who is concerned about his safety." Hermione said, sounding more than a little relieved. "No Death Eater would listen to Harry's reasons for writing home about a dream. Particularly one about an attack."

Dumbledore nodded at her logic. "Let's just hope that is able to contact us again soon with more details of his whereabouts." He said and turned to Remus and Kingsley Shacklebolt. "I believe we can call off the search parties and concentrate more on Voldemort's actions.

Keep an eye and ear out for and sign of Harry though, but I want to monitor Voldemort's moods, he will not be amused about the Weasley's disappearance from their home."

"You're going to stop the search for Harry?" Ron asked, his disapproval evident on his face.

"It is as Hermione said; this letter suggests that Harry is in good hands."

"But I didn't mean for you to call off the search for him." Hermione exclaimed, standing at Ron's side with her hands in front of her, pleading with the headmaster to see reason. "It can't be guaranteed that he sent that with permission. What if he had the dream and sneaked behind his captors back to get it to us?"

"Ms Granger, a tame phoenix is a fiercely loyal creature. There is no way that it would have sent this letter without it being a direct request from its master."

Ron shook his head, his lips curled at one side. "But it is still important to search for him, if only to make sure he is okay. He could be lost, and have no way to get home. Besides, I doubt that Vol...Vol...You-Know-Who will give up the search for him the easily. What if he finds Harry first?"

Silence fell on the room and the company looked to Dumbledore for his reply to Ron's argument.

"He's just saved my life." Hermione said in a softer voice, her anger spent. "And that of Ron and his family. Surely we owe it to him to find him, if only to guarantee his safety?"

Dumbledore's eyes were wistful, and the others in the room became painfully aware of how old the headmaster really was as they watched a brief moment of perceived helplessness caused his face to turn pale and his face to sag. He absently caressed the feather that he still held in his hand before he reached out and handed it back to Ron. "Very well." He said. "I was hoping that as long as Harry's whereabouts were secret from everyone then he'd be safe. But, again,

your younger minds have spoken the voice of reason and Voldemort will not give up his search for Harry this quickly.” He turned to Remus. “Have you thought about the offer I gave you earlier?”

Remus nodded. “I’ll be happy to go back to teaching at Hogwarts, but only if you think that I will be of more use there and that the parents will not be too set against me.”

Dumbledore nodded. “Good.” He said. “In which case you have a month until school starts. I want you and Severus to do a little uncover work for me. Go to the Riddle household and keep an eye on Voldemort’s movements. He’ll know the layout of the house well enough to ensure you both remain hidden from the wards that protect the house as well as being able to administer a certain potion when the time comes. Take Harry’s cloak that we found in Privet Drive for extra security. I want you to report on anything you might hear.”

Remus nodded, but Ron and Hermione still looked against the idea.

“But how will that help Harry?” Ginny asked.

“I’m afraid I cannot afford to let rest of the Order continue the search for Harry, not when Voldemort is becoming more confident in his attacks.” He held up his hands to the protest of Harry’s friends and Molly Weasley. “However, we can make sure that Voldemort remains as much in the dark as to Harry’s whereabouts as we are, at least until we hear from him again.”

Ron felt hot tears swell in his eyes and could sense Hermione shaking her head next to him. “You’re just going to leave him?”

“I’m sorry, Ron. I just don’t have the resources to send out a search party after him.” Dumbledore said, his voice full of regret. “Voldemort is going to become very angry now that Harry has been taken from him, and I can imagine that his attacks on muggles and muggle-borns are going to increase ten-fold. And even though Fudge is beginning to listen to reason, he is still refusing to actively participate in retaliation against Voldemort’s advances. I am sorry about Harry, I truly am, but after what I saw at Privet Drive and from what Severus has told me he has been through, I believe that he is a strong boy

and can look after himself.” He handed the letter back to Ron who was staring at his headmaster with hot anger in his eyes. “And if he does get into trouble, then at least we know that he is able to contact us.” He turned to Kingsley and Tonks. “I trust you can send a group of Aurors out to assess the situation at the Burrow?” the dark-skinned wizard nodded. “Good,” Dumbledore turned to Arthur Weasley who was standing with his arm around his wife. “Feel free to stay here until it is safe to return home.” He glanced at Ron and Hermione. “Though given the circumstances it may be safer to stay here for the rest of the holidays.”

Arthur nodded. “We’ll spend the night.” He said. “Take a fresh look at things in the morning.”

“Very well.” Dumbledore said. “Molly, if you’ll be as kind as to escort these three up to their rooms. I promise I’ll pay a visit in the morning to discuss further arrangements.”

Molly nodded and ushered an angry Ron and the two silent girls out into the hallway, shutting the door behind her, but not before Hermione noticed the Hogwarts’ headmaster take his glasses away from his face and wipe a hand wearily across his eyes. It was an action she had seen Harry perform many a time when he wasn’t sleeping well. With a sigh she followed the others quietly up the stairs, past the silent covered portrait of the late Mrs Black and the stuffed heads of the House elves. It was clear in his argument that Dumbledore was frustrated with the whole thing. It had removed the twinkle from his eye and Hermione was sure he also experienced the feelings of helplessness that she had seen in the facial expressions of the Weasleys and the Aurors she had seen at the meeting.

With a quick hug she and the two female members of the Weasley family said goodnight to Ron as he made his way into the room he had shared with Harry the summer before, then they made their way up the next flight of stairs to where their own dark room awaited.

Chapter 18: Occlumency

Harry groaned as he tried to contain the feeling of nausea that was threatening to evict the contents of his stomach. Even though he had been unconscious for the attack on the Burrow, he had drifted into a more normal sleep moments before Voldemort had unleashed his anger onto his Inner Circle for their failure to bring Arthur and Ron Weasley to him.

This knowledge allowed Harry to push himself back into his pillows, taking a deep breath to settle his stomach as he realised that his friends were safe and hidden elsewhere. From what he could tell the Burrow had been completely destroyed in the Death Eaters' attempts to find something to report to their master, and how much he regretted that Harry felt it a small price to pay for his friends' lives.

He felt his stomach give another lurch and dived forward over the side of his bed, ignoring the screaming protests of his muscles that had been affected by the cruciatus curses Voldemort had inflicted upon his followers in Harry's dreams as he continued to retch.

"Settle down, Pi." He heard a soft voice say, and he felt a comforting hand rest on his heaving back. "Its all over now."

Harry spat into the bowl that had appeared on the floor beside his bed and rested in that position for a few moments, making sure that his stomach was settled enough before pushing himself back onto the bed.

"Here." Kat handed him a glass of water, which he took gratefully, sipping it gently and relishing its coolness against his bile-scorched throat.

He raised a hand and pushed his sweat soaked hair back off his forehead and gave a shaky smile.

"He's mad." He said shakily and Kat's face broke into a large grin.

"So I guess your friends got away safely?" Harry turned to see Leo sitting on the other side of his bed. It had been his hand on his back and Harry nodded.

"I guess the phoenix mail worked." He said coughing slightly as his stomach lurched again. He took a few breaths and another sip of water, trying to stop his hands from shaking as he brought the glass to his lips. "I don't think I've ever seen him so angry."

"Do you experience these visions all the time?" Leo asked in a concerned voice.

Harry shrugged. "To start with my scar just used to hurt." He said. "Then, when he came back properly they started to turn into dreams. They've gotten steadily worse, until last year when he managed to enter my mind. He made me believe that one of my friends were in danger, and I tried to save him, even though he wasn't in any real danger at the time."

"What happened?" Kat asked.

Harry shut his eyes, trying to block out the image of the archway with it veil billowing as Sirius fell through it. "It was a trap, set by Voldemort. That friend wasn't there in the first place, but died after he came to save me."

"Have you ever tried to do anything to prevent these dreams?" Leo asked.

Harry nodded. "My headmaster had me learning Occlumency last year. But I didn't really trust the teacher, and the teacher didn't trust me. I guess it wasn't really the best of working relationships and I didn't really get anywhere with it."

Leo nodded. "Well, I can't teach you Occlumency, but its clear that these dreams can't go on, especially if you want to continue to train here. Voldemort is likely to get more and more frustrated the longer you hide from him, and if you're dreams get any worse you'll be spending more of your time in bed than training."

“What do you propose I do then?” Harry asked.

Leo thought for a few moments gazing absently at Kat as they both ran through the options available to them.

“Occlumency is the ability to control your mind and your emotions to such an extent to be able to prevent anyone else from entering or controlling your thoughts.” Leo thought out loud. “And another way to learn how to control your emotions is to meditate, to clear your mind completely and to find a place where Voldemort or anyone else for that matter, can’t find you.”

“Meditate?” Harry asked a little dubiously. He thought of people sitting in the lotus position, sitting in a circle and humming out loud. “You think it could work?”

“I don’t the meditation will help in itself.” Leo said. “But I think that if you can create a place of calm in your mind that you can go to relax, especially before you sleep, then it will help prevent some of these visions from entering your normal dreams.”

“But who will teach him?” Kat says. “No one here really practises meditation.”

Leo shrugged. “I think this is something Pyro will have to do by himself.” He said. “Its not really meditation that I’m looking for, but simply the act of emptying your mind and finding a place where you can go and Voldemort can’t enter.” He looked at Harry. “It’s the only thing I can really suggest until I can investigate the matter in more depth. Are you willing to give it a go?”

Harry took a deep breath and placed his glass of water on the bedside table. His hands had long since stopped shaking, and though his stomach had settled greatly, he still didn’t feel ready to eat anything. “What do I have to do?” he asked.

Leo thought for a few moments. “Have you ever stared out of a window for a long period of time, with no recognition of anything

going on around you and completely losing all sense of time or place?”

Harry immediately thought of all the times he had drifted off in Divination and smiled slightly. “You mean daydreaming?” he asked with a smile.

Leo shook his head. “No, this goes further than daydreaming. You have no conscious thoughts in this place, everything is completely meaningless, until you suddenly wake up to realise exactly how much time has passed.”

Harry struggled to think of an incident when this had happened, and started to shake his head before he remembered sitting in the cupboard under the stairs as a child. He had spent so many hours locked away in there whilst his aunt and uncle had entertained guests, or had felt the need to shut him away for some misdemeanour he had apparently performed. Some of the time he had spent imagining what life would have been like if he hadn't had to stay with his relatives, and he spent many an hour perfecting the images of his parents in his mind. But what had he done for the rest of the time he had spent in there?

He frowned slightly, trying to remember. There had been that one time when a spider had been making a web in the crook of one of the stairs, and Harry had watched it with rapt attention for a couple of hours until his aunt had banged on the cupboard door, telling him to set the table for dinner. But the rest of the time had been a blank; no memories and no sense of passing time. Was this what Leo had meant by a place where Voldemort couldn't get him?

Harry blinked his eyes and looked about his room, startled to see that it was dark and empty with bright moonlight shining through his slightly open window. He looked down at the bed in front of him and noticed a piece of parchment lying on the blanket. He reached over and opened it up, quickly scanning its contents before smiling slightly. It was a message from Kat and Leo telling him that they would leave him to it, and that they would come see him in the morning. Placing it on the bedside table with the glass of water, Harry took a deep breath and snuggled down under the covers, returning to the place in his

mind where he had been moments before. Within minutes he felt a sense of calm and relaxed even more, letting his mind empty of all thoughts before he blissfully fell asleep.

Chapter 19: Bear.

Harry stood at the entrance to the dormitory he had been directed to and took a deep breath as ten boys stopped what they were doing to look up at him. As the silence grew Harry tried to swallow the large lump that had appeared in his chest and smiled shyly. "Hi, I'm Pi." He said, hoping his voice didn't waver too much in the silence. "I'm just starting out here."

The lump in his chest grew, making it hard to breathe as the eyes on the boys' faces narrowed into ones of suspicion. Kat had warned him that this would happen, that every new comer would be seen as a threat and treated accordingly. At the time Harry had assured her that he would be fine, but now he was beginning to wonder if the whole thing had been a good idea.

"That's yours." One boy said, indicating a bed by the door. Harry took one look at it and realised its positioning was symbolic. He was the newcomer – someone not to be trusted. The bed looked lumpy and dusty, as if it had been used as a dumping post for the other boys' equipment as they came into the dormitory. Harry's heart hammered in his chest as he weakly smiled a thank-you before going to place his limited belongings into the cabinet by the side of his bed.

Quiet conversations started once more as he went about his business. He sensed that some of the boys were looking at him, but he tried to ignore them as he sat on his bed, facing the door, and thought back to the conversations he had had that morning with Horus.

His tutor had told him that he would be moved to the main dormitories that night, and that he would be starting his physical lessons in the morning. Harry had sensed that his master was not entirely happy with this turn of events, but apparently it had been ordered by the Doyen himself. Horus had gone on to explain a few things, such as the fact that Harry would no longer be able to talk to Kat, Leo or himself. When asked why he went on to explain that, as a student of the Marcello school, Harry was obliged to only have contact with the Master who was training him at the time as this was supposed to increase loyalty and respect for that master. Harry had said that it sounded more as if the school wanted to prevent friendships being

formed outside the classroom and that the Masters had a power complex. Horus had smiled at this and told Harry that he would do fine, as long as he kept a low profile for a couple of days and practised long and hard at his studies.

Harry sighed as he lay back on his new bed. It was late and the murmurs of conversations were slowly dying down as the other boys went off to sleep. His thoughts drifted to his friends and he wondered, not for the first time, whether they were still looking for him. He missed them a lot, and felt guilty that they would be feeling worried about him. He thought about sending them another message by with his new-found phoenix powers, just to reassure them, and decided that he would within the next couple of days.

With another sigh he closed his eyes, sinking down into his quiet place before falling quickly into a deep sleep.

The morning came quickly, and Harry awoke to the sounds of the other boys getting dressed into their training clothes; light and loose trousers and a tighter shirt with short sleeves. Many of them also had combat robes hanging up by their beds, each with a different emblem on the front. Harry couldn't imagine wearing one in a real fight, he was sure that their length and weight would be sure to hinder movement, but he guessed it was something he would be getting used to.

He tied his white belt around his own waist, quickly smoothing out the tight shirt and pulling the loose trousers down slightly before following the others out of the dormitories. There was not much conversation as the boys walked and Harry used this time to watch the other boys as they walked in front of him. Many of them looked to be a couple of years older than himself, though, due to the growth spurt he had experienced since he left Hogwarts they were not that much taller than him. He noticed with a slight apprehension that though there was not much difference in height, it was clear that there was a great amount of difference in the amounts of muscle and poise as seemed to glide down the corridor. Harry felt clumsy and awkward as they walked, reminding himself of the way Victor Krum had moved when he had met him in the triwizard tournament. He assumed that the poise came from the training, and silently hoped that he wouldn't

make too much of a fool of himself on his first day by tripping over his own feet.

Another great difference was that the other students were well armed with swords lying across their backs and daggers sheathed in their belts. Harry gulped slightly, again thinking to himself that maybe this wasn't such a good plan after all. He had felt pride in the speed at which he had been able to accomplish wandless magic, but the euphoria he had felt when offered the chance to start the mainstream classes was a far cry from the nervousness he was feeling now.

Harry followed the other students through a large set of wooden doors and stood alongside them as they lined up along one wall, each one standing to a form of attention with their legs shoulder width apart and their arms held high in front of them, their fists crossed at the wrists.

The silence that filled the large empty room did nothing to quench Harry's nerves, and he was unsure of whether or not to mimic the other boys or to stand and introduce himself to his new master first. He didn't have a chance to decide, however, as the doors to the hall once more flew open and a powerful looking bear lumbered before the line, pushing itself up onto its hind legs to tower a couple of feet above them before letting out a ear-popping roar.

If Harry had thought that bears were cute, if somewhat larger than the toy-representations of them, then he couldn't have been much further from the truth. This bear held no warmth in its dark eyes, and its powerful paws looked as if they could fell a sturdy oak with a half-hearted swipe.

He wondered briefly why none of the other students in the room had flinched at the creature's entrance, then he sighed with heart-felt relief when the bear transformed into a tall and thickset man.

His relief was short lived as the man marched up to where he was standing at the end of the line. Harry found himself subjected to the cold stare of the dark eyes, and gulped slightly, trying to straighten his back and look emotionless as the man's gaze travelled up his face to rest on his scar.

“Ah, you must be Leo’s new protégé.” The man said, his deep voice matching the roar of the bear earlier. “I have heard a bit about you, and have been told that you hold great potential.”

Harry couldn’t let himself relax to the man’s seemingly innocent words. There was just something about the man standing before him that Harry didn’t trust, and he attempted to keep himself calm, planning to wait out his new tutor.

“BUT!”

Harry jumped at the sudden increase of volume, and saw out of the corner of his eye that the heads of the other boys had turned slightly to watch the encounter with curiosity.

“The ability to master the art of animagi and wandless magic means nothing in this class if you do not respect a number of rules.” The man tore his gaze from Harry’s forehead and started to walk down the line, eying up the other boys who had returned to standing at attention as he scrutinised their postures. “You will respect what I say, and what I do. Everything that goes on in this room during training practises has its purpose, and you will accept everything without retaliation. You will do as I say and what I wish, and any divergence to these rules will be treated accordingly.”

The man had come to stand once more in front of Harry and looked down at the boy with a look that would have made Snape cringe away. “What is your name?”

Harry tried to straighten his back once more and took a quick breath before answering. “Pi, sir” he said.

The man frowned slightly. “And what sort of name is that?” he asked, spitting out his words as he took a step closer, pushing his face closer to Harry’s. “You mastered animagi, did you not? Why were you not named after your form?”

Harry gulped once more, trying to return the look of his master and resisting the urge to lower his eyes. Leo had discussed the matter of letting others know of his phoenix form and it had been decided that the ability was best kept secret until its full potential was discovered. Until then, he had suggested using Kat's pet name of Pi instead of Pyro. "I'm a multi-animagi" Harry replied, a slight waver to his voice. He took a deep breath and continued a little stronger. "Pi is an infinite number, matching the infinite number of forms I can take."

The eyes in front of him narrowed. "Insolence will not be tolerated in my classes, boy" the large man in front of Harry said threateningly. "An infinite number of forms is impossible, and you know it."

Harry bit the inside of his lip, and fought any attempt to shout back at the man's face. Since his first transformations into a phoenix, and with all the work he had done on seeking his centre before sleep, Harry had found that his anger could be easily controlled, and he sought now to push the building pressure in his chest away into the depths of that place where they could not manifest themselves into an unbridled expression of his emotions.

"I dislike it when people try to make fun of me." The master said. "And you will learn to address me properly. From now on you will enter the room and line up as the others have done. You will hold your arms up in front throughout the lesson until you are called upon to take your instructions. Now hold up your arms."

The bear of a man moved away as Harry raised his arms into a similar posture as the others. He settled his feet a comfortable distance apart and tried to make his body look rigid and unmovable. He cast his eyes over the wall in front of him and focused intensely on one spot, failing to see the thick cane come down on his forearms until it passed in front of his face.

He gasped out a cry of surprise, and pulled his arms into his body, protecting them from another attack.

"Hold your arms out!" the master ordered. "Never let them drop. No matter what happens in this room you will obey only the instructions directed to you. And I told you to hold your arms up!"

Harry once more raised his arms, taking in the red welt that ran from the back of one arm to the other. His breaths were coming in small, unsure gasps. He couldn't believe what was happening as he sensed the cane being raised above his head once more.

He unconsciously flinched as the cane dropped, and his arms jerked away, causing the cane to slap against his wrists rather than his forearms.

A book was then thrust into his hands and he once more had the bear-like face of his master come close to his own. "Hold this book in your arms, shoulder height. You will not let this book drop below the level of your shoulders. Understood?"

Harry nodded slightly, not really understanding the reason for inflicting such pain, but he gripped the cover of the book and raised his arms again, so that his palms would face down. This time he managed not to jerk his arms away when the cane dropped, though his face still creased with pain.

"You will respect and obey what I say." The master was telling him in between strokes.

Harry mentally shook his head. He knew you could not gain respect by beating it into people. Even Voldemort had not been able to accomplish that. The members of his Inner Circle had a look of fear and ashamedness in their eyes every time they entered a room with the Dark Lord, and Harry realised, as he watched the red welts appear on his arm, that it was the fear of what that shame could turn into that made people like Voldemort beat their followers into submission.

Harry began to feel detached from the pain in his arms as more blows fell. His eyes focused on the book he gripped with white-knuckled hands and he casually ran his eyes over its title, the dark blade of justice, before letting his mind wander back to his friends. He wondered where they were, and he remembered that he had planned the night before to send them a note to say that he was okay and not to worry about him. He smiled slightly as he thought that it would

probably be best if he left this incident out of the letter, and pulled back his shoulders and focused on the book in front of him as the blows continued to fall.

The blows continued for the best part of ten minutes, with Harry's new master displaying the extent of his stamina as the cane fell rhythmically across his forearms. When the punishment was finally finished, Harry's face was flushed and beaded with sweat due to the effort it took to hold up his arms. And he shook slightly as Orson took the book out of his hands, then turned to the rest of the class and barking out orders.

Harry slowly let his eyes focus on the mess of his arms and winced as he saw that his forearms were crisscrossed with angry looking welts, some of which had split the skin in places and he felt a warm trail of blood run down the outside of his left arm. The blood had a strangely soothing effect on the burning of his skin and he sighed in resigned acceptance before turning his wandering mind to what his new master was teaching to the other students.

Chapter 20: Hermione's dream

Ron stared into the crackling flames as he reclined on the sofa in the Order's headquarters. It had been almost a month since Harry had disappeared, and there hadn't been any word from his friend since the letter that had warned them of the attack on the Burrow.

Ron's home had been destroyed. His parents had taken him and Ginny back there a couple of days after the attack to see what could be salvaged and Ron remembered the grim horror he had felt when he saw that hardly anything remained of the home he had grown up in.

The house that had once looked as if it had been held together with magic had been flattened and burnt, and the remains of a dark cloud hovering above the building indicated where the projection of the Dark Mark had been cast. He had held his mother as she cried, her shoulders shaking and had seen the anger in his brothers' eyes as they read the foot tall letters that had been painted on one of the walls left standing:

He will pay – as will those who stand in my way.

Now, sitting back in the warm living room of Grimmauld Place, Ron felt anger course through his veins. For a brief moment this anger had been directed towards his missing friend, as the Death Eaters had evidently been hunting for Harry when they attacked his house. Then he remembered Snape's description of the torture sessions Harry had been put through, and he knew that blaming his friend for his loss was wrong. Harry had suffered his own losses over the past year, and the only person who could be blamed for everything was Voldemort.

"Voldemort"

He almost shocked himself when he whispered the name out loud, and looked down to where Hermione was snuggled safely in the crook of his arm, her head on his chest. She moved a little and let out a little sigh, but she did not awake.

Ron looked back into the fire and nodded slightly. It was Voldemort that had caused all this anguish, and he knew that, according to the prophecy, it would be Harry that would make him pay. He realised that he was no longer afraid of the Dark Lord's name, and let his chest fill with Gryffindor courage. He made a silent pledge to his absent friend that he would stand by his side and support him through everything, no longer letting childish squabbles get in the way of their friendship. The time had passed for that, and the upcoming war was forcing them to grow up quickly.

In the protection of his arms, Hermione moaned slightly. Her face had creased up and she was muttering in her sleep as her head fitfully turned from side to side. It had become a regular occurrence for the two of them to seek each other's company at Grimmauld Place, where the Weasleys were now staying. And on more than one occasion had the two had fallen asleep in front of the fire and had been woken up in the mornings by one of Ron's older brothers or his mother, who always had a small smile on her face as she would hold a tray with a pot of tea on for the both of them. It seemed that she understood their need to hold and comfort each other since Harry had disappeared.

Ron gently shifted slightly, until he was able to free a hand enough to shake her shoulder. "Hermione," he said quietly. "It's just a dream. Wake up now."

A few moments later her brown eyes flew open and looked around the room quickly as she tried to recognise her surroundings. When her eyes finally made contact with Ron's, the Weasley boy smiled at her slightly. "Hey," he said, expecting her features to soften and a small smile to appear as they had done on previous occasions when they had fallen asleep in front of the fire. But this time, they filled with tears and she buried her head in his shoulder as she started to cry.

"Hey, what's up?" Ron asked, gently rubbing her shoulder. A few weeks ago this action would have seemed alien to the tall red-head, but it had almost become second nature now. "What did you dream? Do you want to talk about it?"

"It was Harry." Hermione sobbed. "He was with a man, who was beating him across the arms with a cane. He looked in so much pain."

Ron gently pulled her into a stronger embrace until her sobs had died away. "It's okay, 'Mione" he said. "It was just a dream"

"But I don't think it was." She said. "It was almost as if I was seeing from his point of view. I could see the look in the man's eyes, and I could feel the cane come down... I can even remember the title of the book Harry was forced to hold."

Ron smiled slightly. "But this is you, Hermione, of course you would remember the title of a book."

Hermione sat up and looked at him angrily. "I'm not joking, Ron. I really think this really happened. Like one of his visions or something."

"But how can that be?" Ron asked, trying to be realistic. "Harry only experiences those visions because of the link between Voldemort and his scar. You don't have such a link with Harry. It was only a dream...."

His voice died away as he saw the shocked expression on Hermione's face. "What?" he asked.

"You said his name."

Ron smiled slightly and looked down at his hands. "I've done some thinking this afternoon. And realised that you were right all along, there really is nothing to fear in a name. It's the man you have to be scared of, and Harry's going to need all the support he can get if he is the one expected to kill him. The last thing he's going to need is a best mate who can't even say the name of the person we're up against."

Hermione nodded with a small smile. "Well, it took you long enough." She said and Ron smiled back at her and shrugged slightly.

“So, what do you want to do about this dream.” He asked. “If you really think that it was real, don’t you think we ought to tell someone?”

Hermione thought for a few moments, biting on her bottom lip. She eventually shook her head. “There isn’t really much we can do.” She said. “Even if anyone did believe me that it was real, I don’t have enough information to be able to locate him. And, it wasn’t even as if he was tied up or anything. He was just standing there with his arms out in front of him, and he just let the man cane him.” She formed a fist and thumped one of the cushions on the sofa. “Now I know how Harry must’ve felt when we didn’t believe him about the vision of Sirius.”

Ron shook his head. “But I do believe you.” he said. “Since I’ve been friends with Harry I’ve realised that anything could happen. Maybe he was projecting his thoughts out to you or something. If he had enough strength to do blow up the Dursley’s it stands to reason that anything could be possible.”

Hermione smiled again, and leant down to curl back up into Ron’s arms. “I think I’m rubbing off on you.” she said with a smirk. “Ron Weasley is actually beginning to think.”

Ron nudged her slightly in retaliation for her comment, but he secretly smiled over the top of her head as he gently kissed her brown hair. “Get some sleep.” He said. “We’ll run it past Dumbledore after the next meeting. Even if he does think nothing of it, then at least he’ll know.”

Hermione nodded slightly, yawning. “Night, Ron.” She murmured.

“Night, ‘Mione.”

Chapter 21: First Fight.

Harry stood in the corner of the training hall, willing himself not to move or drop his arms as the other boys were paired up and were given their practise moves of the day. He watched out of the corner of his eye as Orson walked among the six pairs of boys adjusting grips on their weapons and altering their foot work as the boys lunged and parried against one another. Occasionally, Orson would take his own weapon from where it was sheathed across his back to demonstrate a particular move. Harry could see that the man was confident in the subject, and the boy closely watched as the man moved around, taking mental notes of what was seen as a right move, and what was seen as incorrect.

It was a further fifteen minutes before Orson returned to stand in front of Harry. By now, the ache across Harry's shoulders was great and his arms were shaking almost uncontrollably in their effort to stay up to the acquired height.

"Come." Orson said. "I wish to demonstrate a new move with the students today, and at the same time we can see exactly how much talent you lack. But first we have to pick you out a weapon."

He led Harry to a table that ran along the length of one wall. On the dark wood lay numerous swords, their blades glinting in the light. "I assume I am right when I say you haven't handled a sword in your life?"

Harry thought back to when he had pulled Gryffindor's sword from the sorting hat, and battled the basilisk with it. He hesitated before mentioning this, though, his eyes once more passing over the blades in front of him and realising that they looked a lot larger, and a lot more deadly than that of the straight sword he had pulled from the hat.

"No, sir." He said quietly and Orson smiled at him, making Harry shudder slightly under the dark gaze.

"In which case, I think this blade will suit you well." Orson picked up one of the larger blades on the table, and passed it to Harry who

wincing at its weight as he tried to support it with his already tired arms.

“Um, sir?” Harry frowned as he had to use two hands to grip the handle of the slightly curving blade to stop its tip from dropping to the floor. “Don’t you think I should start off with one of the lighter ones, maybe build up to this one?”

Orson turned his cold gaze onto Harry once more. “Have you already forgotten what I told you, boy?” he said. “You will do what I say, without question. If I say this is your blade then this is the blade you will use. Do you doubt that I know what I’m talking about?”

Harry shook his head slightly. “No, sir” he said, and Orson smiled at him again, his eyes travelling up to the scar on his forehead once more.

“Good.” He said and turned away. He called the other students up to him, and they took their place in a line, with their arms once more raised in front of them, each one eyeing Harry with interest.

“Today, class, I am going to show you the importance of speed in a duel. To keep your opponent off-balance with quick, repeated and unforgiving attacks can strike fear into him, leaving him unable to think clearly and therefore open for your final and disarming blow.”

Harry stared with growing dread at the back of his Master, and he was alarmed to see that the eyes of some of the students had lit up with a similar hunger as Harry had seen in the eyes of Avery when he had been held captive.

“Remember, speed is the key, don’t give them time to think up their own attack plan, and try to prevent them from forming a proper defence strategy.” Harry drew in a sharp breath as the Master turned to him quickly, his sword quickly disappearing from its sheath across his back to appear in his hand, already pointed to Harry. “Ready, boy?”

Harry’s chest tightened with panic as, without warning, Orson headed towards him, sword swinging towards Harry’s head.

Harry grunted as he swung the weight of his own blade up, deflecting the first blow, and barely registering as Orson ducked out of his direct sight in order to swing again from Harry's right.

Within moments, Harry had given up on trying to swing the blade in defence, and started to rely more on his quidditch reflexes, ducking out of the way of the swinging blade. For such a heavysset man, Harry became anxious when he realised that his reflexes were matched, if not superior, to his own, and Harry quickly became tired at the short but rapid attacks.

He felt the first slice from the blade less a minute into the duel, as he twisted to the right in anticipation of Orson's next move and barely managed to miss the sword that he found blocking his way, its tip ran across his upper arm. Harry's eyes widened at the clean cut, slightly shocked at the lack of pain he felt from the extremely sharp blade as the blood ran freely down his arm.

He was quickly snapped out of his trance when he felt the blade whip by him again, catching the back of his leg as he dived out the way, rolling slightly before trying to get to his feet again.

Almost instantly he felt another impact from the blade, and he began to lose the determination to keep going. He threw a quick glance at the other students, wondering when Orson would realise he had won and stop the attack. He felt another strike across his left arm, and staggered slightly before feeling the burning sensation of Orson's disarming blow across his back, sending Harry to his knees as the blood started to flow freely down his spine from his shoulder blades.

As he struggled to make sense of what had just happened, Harry saw Orson lower himself down onto one knee in front of him, a sneer causing his already dark features to appear darker than ever. "You are not worthy of this class." He told Harry. "From now on, you will do nothing more than serve this group, cleaning weapons and conducting basic maintenance, until you show yourself worthy of learning more."

Harry watched in a detached state of mind as the master stood up and walked to his other students, leaving Harry bleeding on his knees. He felt a sense of failure as he watched the others leave the room, and he vaguely wondered how long it would be before he could see his friends again, before pain and exhaustion overtook his mind and he fell forward in a faint.

Chapter 22: Riddle Manor

Remus Lupin let himself drop down onto the dusty floor next to Snape and silently accepted the flask the potion's master held out to him before speaking. "More people are starting to arrive. I'm guessing there's going to be a meeting tonight. With any luck an important one."

Snape shot a glare at the werewolf as he massaged the long fingers on his left hand. The pain from the black mark was becoming so great that his hand had cramped up into a claw. "You don't say." He muttered.

Remus passed the flask back, looking at the disfigured hand for a moment before diverting his attention to their surroundings again. "What do you think he's going to say tonight?" he asked, ignoring the evil stare as he reached out for the bag that lay between them and pulled out one of Molly's sandwiches.

Snape sighed. "He only calls us all together like this for two reasons." He explained. "One, he's planning some sort of attack. Most likely an large one if he's calling up so many people."

Lupin nodded. "We'd be lucky." He said, swallowing his mouthful and taking another. "The other?"

"More probable that someone or something has annoyed him, and he wants to prove his superiority. He's been calling a lot of these recently."

Remus took his time to study the potion master's face as he finished his sandwich. Snape was staring at the stone wall opposite, still absently rubbing his fingers and trying to get them to straighten out. They had been sitting together, hidden inside the Riddle Manor for nearly two days now, both knowing it was nothing short of a miracle that they hadn't been spotted yet. Snape had been clearly nervous about re-entering the place where all the occupants would not think twice about his death, but he had pulled up his emotionless face again and just got on with it. Remus recognised that it took a man of

great control and inner strength to be able to face his greatest fears without so much as a complaint. Though, looking closer at his profile, Remus could see that the man's usually pallid face looked more ashen than normal, and his breaths were quicker and lighter than a man completely at ease with the situation.

"What are you staring at, wolf?" Snape muttered, not turning his head to face the werewolf.

"Your last meeting here." Remus replied, ignoring the man's icy words. "The one where you helped Harry disappear. Did they call everyone up for that?"

Snape blew some air through his nose in what Remus could only identify as amusement. "That boy didn't need any help." He said. "He just needed to someone to tell him what he was capable of."

Remus raised his eyebrow. "And you've realised this after how many years of telling him he's incapable?" he asked, but the potions master didn't reply, just continued to rub agitatedly at his hand. "Some would say that was help enough." He added after a moments thought. "Especially as it came from someone who would never normally give him such encouragement." He sighed. "And, on behalf of James and Lily, I'm grateful."

Snape turned his head to look at the werewolf when he heard the honesty in his voice and watched as the golden haired man rummaged in the bag and started pulling out some long lengths of pink string. "We'd better get these in place" Remus said, trying to untangle them. "They'll be starting the meeting soon and we don't want to be seen."

Snape nodded and took a deep breath as Remus handed him one of the fleshy strings of the extendable ears. He shook his head slightly as he pushed himself to his feet, in wonder as to how two of the most irritating students he had ever taught could waste their obvious intelligence on things that would only be used in pranks and mischief. As he followed the werewolf in a crouch down the corridor he corrected himself. Tonight the extendable ears were not going to be

used in a carefree setting, rather they could even determine the lives of numerous muggles and magic-folk alike.

As they reached the end of the enclosed half of the corridor, Remus sat on his haunches and leaned slightly against the wall as he looked between the stone pillars of the balcony at the scene below them.

Voldemort was standing in a small circle of his followers, talking in lowered voices. It was clear that he was explaining something to them as they nodded together in agreement at what he was saying. "Do you know them?" Remus asked in a low voice and Snape gave him an incredulous look that indicated the question was pointless.

"I'm sure you recognise Malfoy, made some sort of a deal with Fudge and escaped Azkaban. And I believe you owe Bellatrix Lestrange for her actions in the ministry." He said, watching the muscles in the werewolf's jaw tighten. He nodded at the group before continuing, "Someone you may not have seen for a while is Avery. He's probably the sickest of the lot." Remus threw a glance his way and his eyes opened wide at the green countenance of the potions master. "Luckily I got to Harry before he did." Snape said, in way of explanation, but Remus remained horrified, his mind full of disturbing images of what the Potter boy might have been through. "Well, that time anyway. There are also two of the newer members there." Snape continued, ignoring the look on his colleague's face. If it were any other time Remus would say the greasy professor would have enjoyed his look of disbelief, but when on such a mission, teamwork was vital and both men knew they couldn't afford to linger on such petty issues. "One of them is just out of Durmstrang, I think the other is on the payroll at the ministry. Would have to run that one by Kingsley to be sure though. Look, they're leaving."

Remus snapped his attention back to the hall below them and watched as the five Death Eaters left the room. "Where are they going?" he asked.

Snape shook his head, a slight frown creasing his forehead. "I don't know." He said. "But I don't like it. The only reason they've left the hall this close to a meeting before is to pick up a prisoner from the

dungeons. And even then it's a job for people like Crabbe and Goyle, the lumbering oafs, rather than five of the top duellists."

Remus shifted slightly, beginning to feel apprehensive due to the potion master's words and tone of voice, and watched as Voldemort walked up the couple of steps to where his high-backed chair was standing.

"Welcome." He said, with a sickening smile, raising his arms and getting the room's attention. "I am glad that you all saw fit to join me here this evening, and I promise you it will be one to remember..."

Remus noticed a flash of light out of the corner of his eye and turned to see Snape staring wide eyed at a golden feather that had floated to the floor just in front of him.

"Where did that come from?" Remus asked, his chest constricting.

"It just appeared." Snape muttered, reaching for the folded bit of parchment that rested beneath it. The minds of both men recalled the feather that Ron Weasley had claimed had delivered the warning message from Harry moments before the Burrow had been attacked.

"Is it from him?" Remus asked, shifting his weight slightly to get a better look at the parchment.

Snape slowly unfolded the parchment, and his breath hitched as he recognised the untidy scrawl of the Potter boy.

"Get out of there, they can see you! – HP"

Both men glanced at each other, their eyes wide in fear, before looking down at the hall to see the Death Eaters standing in a circle, eagerly waiting that night's entertainment to arrive.

"They're coming for us." Remus whispered in realisation, and suddenly stood, grabbing Snape's arm and pulling them both back down the corridor. He skidded to a stop besides where they had left the food and equipment bag and started stuffing their belongings into it.

“Leave it.” Snape hissed, pulling the werewolf to his feet. He stuffed the letter and the phoenix feather into his pocket before passing Remus his broom and grabbed the other. “If they’re coming for us then we have no time!” He started running the rest of the way down the corridor, towards the broken window they had entered by two days previously. As they neared it, they heard a shout from behind them. Snape threw a look of his shoulder to see Bellatrix and Malfoy leading the pack of Death Eaters through the archway at the other end of the balcony that ran the length of the ceiling of the hall. “Jump!” he shouted to Lupin as the bright flashes of curses started hitting the walls next to them, and dived for the window before them, falling for a couple of seconds before pulling his broom under him and gaining control over it before he hit the floor.

Behind him he heard a shout of pain and turned to see Remus falling awkwardly through the window, the broom leaving his hand, and Snape caught a glimpse of something protruding from the man’s shoulder before he started twisting as he fell to the ground.

Without thinking of his actions, Snape pulled on his broom and dived for the falling body, wincing as the muscles in his cramped hand protested against the sudden effort. Eventually he came beneath Remus Lupin and pulled him across the front of his broom before pulling up and twisting away from the walls of the manor, flying out of the range of the curses the Death Eaters were still sending their way.

After a few minutes of flying as fast as he could, Snape slowed down a little, looking for an appropriate place to land so that he could assess the werewolf’s condition. The man was barely balanced on the broom, and his breaths were coming in painful gasps as the broom bucked slightly in the strong breeze. In a few moments, Snape spotted a small wood and headed there, landing on the grass just before he hit the trees, and trying to support the werewolf’s weight as they stumbled slightly.

Snape dragged Remus into the cover of the trees and quickly found the cause of the man’s anguish. In his left shoulder Snape found a silver dagger, marked with the stamp of Avery. He knew a silver knife could prove lethal if left embedded in the werewolf’s skin for too long,

and Remus was already looking pale and was on the verge of slipping into unconsciousness. Snape took a firm hold of the knife and jerked it from the man's back, quickly tucking the knife into his robes and pressing his hand against the wound to stem the flow of blood.

"Thanks." He heard the injured man whisper painfully. Snape just gave him a wry smile before a movement in the corner of his eye made the potions master look up to see a number of brooms carrying their riders towards him. The Death Eaters were spread in a fan shape and were travelling quickly and close to the ground, trying to spot the two Order members.

"Time to leave, I think." Snape muttered, adjusting his weight slightly so that the palm of his cramped left hand could press against the wound on Remus' back, whilst his able right hand searched in his pockets for the gold pocket watch Dumbledore had given them before they had left. When he found it he pulled it out, and wrapped his arms around the werewolf, supporting the man as much as he could before pointing his wand at the watch and calling "portus". Within the blink of an eye, both men had disappeared, moments before the shadow of two brooms drifted over where they had been sitting and two pairs of eyes searched the woods for any sign of the escapees.

Pink-fogg – so glad you reviewed!! Lightened up my day after my first insulting review (see below!!!). Thanks!!!.

Horsecrzy – thanks hun. Review is appreciated. ;-)

CountessMel – who doesn't know something about Harry's scar? But well done for picking up on it, that comes into play about ch45ish!!!! It's one of the parts I have written already!!! Just need to finish the great chasm in between! :-s

Frozenwings – stop trying to second-guess me, you'll spoil the story line ;-). Lol. I'm glad you are enjoying it though. And thank-you for the compliments about my writing style, it means a lot to me. And, I'm afraid to say that there are a lot more than another 20 chapters to

come. I've finished my rough outline now, and would like to announce that there are approximately 65 chapters to this story. Just have to write them now. :-s

Stick with me though, I'll write and post when I can, though it might get a bit random once I finish uni.

LOTRfan86 – hope my advice helps. I didn't really know what to say. Glad you're liking this story, and good luck with your own endeavours. Oh, and I forgot to mention; baby name sites are great for looking up names with appropriate meanings to characters (though "Lucius" got me. I mean, "bringer of light"??? – what's JK playing at???) and a thesaurus helps a lot!!! Hope to see you posting soon!!!

Chocoliciouz – you just continue to live in your own little dream world sweetie!!! Lord knows that I do!!!! And Harry is there by his own free will. He thinks it will help him fight the Big V. How he gets over this set back will be explained in a couple of chapters, so don't worry. Keep reading!!!!

Padfoot – how big is the grin on my face after reading your review?? I understand about the lacking of good stories, there have been an influx on Hermione focused ones recently, and to be honest, I'm only really interested in the ones that centre on Harry. That's one of the reasons I'm writing this story. And a romance lover?? I'll let you know that I'm not great at writing romances – but have just finished writing a bit of fluff, though I'm not one to linger, but just so you know what to look forward to. As for getting back to R&H – hmmm. To be honest I keep forgetting. I'll make sure it happens a bit later though. Promise.

Daesereg – thanks for reviewing. I've already planned out all what Harry does in the story, and I have a feeling it might get a little bit worse for you before it gets better. Hope you stick with me though, and I'll try and keep super-Harry to a minimum for you!! Let me know if it gets too much!!!

Jack Wilde, Candidus-Lupus-full moon, purple bunny, blip-dragon, Angelisl, Laughing, Striking panther, Spacecatdet – thank-you all Can only hope that you enjoy the rest!!

Ranko – I'm sorry you feel that way. I assure you I'm not in anyway a cheater – have you seen how many similar story lines there are on this fanfic site? There are so many stories that there will undeniably be some that are similar in content. I can assure you, though, that whereas the idea of a different school is not entirely original – my progression through the plot and the finale is. Well, at least to my knowledge. But if you don't choose to read the rest, then it's up to you. Each to their own, and I'll try not to take it personally.

Meanwhile, if anyone else wants to send any constructive criticism my way, feel free. I'm happy to hear about points I've mixed up or grammar I've got wrong. It makes for a better and more readable story. Try and lay off the insults if you can though, I'm rather sensitive ;-) Cheers. Kit. Xxxx

Chapter 23: Sound advice.

Harry sat tiredly in the dining hall at the end of one of the long tables and watched the other boys eat their breakfast whilst he absently pushed his food around his plate. He was sat with his back unnaturally straight in an attempt to keep the wound that stretched across his shoulders from pulling open again. Not that he could move his shoulders that easily anyhow. He had felt them stiffen up as he sat awake in his bed the night before, due to the ordeal he had been put through during his first class. He had spent the night willing himself not to fall asleep, knowing that the meagre achievements he had made in keeping Voldemort out of his head whilst he slept would do nothing to escape the back-lash of the Dark Lord's anger following the escape of Remus and Snape from Riddle Manor.

He sighed and pushed his plate away, and tried not to look at the angry welts that now crossed his arms as he gingerly reached for a goblet of pumpkin juice and took a long refreshing drink.

He shakily put the goblet down on the table in front of him, and aimlessly watched the liquid swirl around its bottom before he was startled by another presence walking up to the bench next to him. He looked up to see a stocky, dark-skinned young man with a wide smile stepping over the bench and took a seat.

"Hi," he said, holding out his hand. "I'm Sheridan" he said, "and I'm guessing you're Pyro, more affectionately known as Pi!" he added as Harry hesitantly shook his hand.

Harry nodded slightly, a questioning look in his eyes. "I'm a good friend of Horus'," the boy replied to Harry's unspoken question. "We started out here together, though he progressed a little faster than I. He and Kat can't come and talk to you, for obvious reasons, but they wondered whether I would just pop over and find out how you were doing?"

Harry smiled slightly as he looked up and the head table to see Horus looking down at him. The hawk-animagus gave him a quick smile in return and a nod, then turned his head in conversation to the master who was sitting next to him.

"I'm okay." Harry said. "Bit stiff after yesterday, but I'll get over it."

"And the wound on your back?" Sheridan asked, his eyes softening slightly with concern. Harry frowned slightly at him, wondering how Sheridan had found out or whether his wound was really that obvious. "News travels fast here, considering most of us don't really talk that much," the boy explained with a grin. "There isn't much trust wasted on friendships in this place, but rumour-mongering is a favourite pastime. Besides, most of us know what Orson is about. He wouldn't think twice about attacking a novice, especially one with as much acclaim as yourself."

Harry sent him a glare out of the side of eyes and the boy laughed. "Doesn't bother me, mate." He said. "I've heard nearly all about you through Horus, not much we don't share to be honest. And, whereas a lot of people here probably won't declare their loyalties, I'm most definitely on your side." His face fell a little bit. "My parents were killed the first time round." He said. "I was scouted from a wizarding orphanage about three years ago, been here ever since."

Harry nodded. "So maybe you can explain a few things, then." He said, and Sheridan nodded for him to continue. "Why does Orson treat his students in such a way?"

Sheridan laughed a little and shrugged. "Wouldn't we all like to know." He said. "Some think he is only interested in his own promotion, and that he is only really teaching us students until he can take the place of the Doyen. Others think that he sees each new student as a threat to his own position, and tries to suppress anyone who shows too much potential." He paused and thought for a few moments. "I guess the two of those ideas could really be run alongside one another." He mused. "But the person to really ask is Kat."

"How come?" Harry asked. "Because she's been brought up here?"

Sheridan shot Harry a disbelieving look. "Because he's her father." He explained, as if he had expected Harry to already know that fact.

Harry's mouth fell open. "You're joking!" he exclaimed. "That brute is her father?" He looked down at the goblet still in his hands, "I guess that explains the comment she made about paternal instincts when I first arrived here." He said.

Sheridan nodded; "not exactly the father-type figure is he?" he agreed and leaned in slightly. "Look, tell me to shove off if you think I'm sticking my nose in too far." He said. "But I'm a horse animagus, and its kinda in my nature." He glanced around slightly to make sure no one was within hearing range before continuing. "But I'm pretty good friends with Kat, and she has been talking a lot about you. In fact, I'd say she seems pretty smitten with you, if you know what I mean?"

Harry watched as the boy jiggled his eyebrows suggestively and shook his head. "So what?" he asked. "She's in a school full of boys, if I were in a school full of girls then I'd be smitten with a couple of them as well."

Sheridan laughed slightly, then shook his head and became serious again. "Just watch your step, Pi." He warned. "Her father doesn't take too kindly to anyone wooing his daughter, it's about the only parent-type thing he does. Though I feel its more about the prevention of grand-children than anything. The last guy who fell for Kat got injured pretty bad, and left soon after. So, unless you progress through your classes like lightning, then I'd watch your step is all."

Harry snorted slightly. "That'll be forever then" he said, and went on to explain what had happened in his first class. "The only thing he thinks I'm good for is cleaning the armoury, that's what I have to do until I can prove myself." He finished.

"Have you never been taught the basics in sword handling?" Sheridan asked and when Harry shook his head slightly he frowned. "I thought most wizard-born children had some experience of swordsmanship?" He said.

Harry shook his head again. "I was brought up by muggles after Voldemort killed my parents." He said. "The only thing I learnt there was how not to burn bacon, and even that was self taught."

“So you have no training in fitness either? Balance and footwork? That sort of stuff?” at Harry’s negative answer, Sheridan let out a short burst of breath. “Well I’d suggest that you spend every waking hour working on it. You’ll never survive here otherwise, especially with Orson on your back. It won’t be long before that white belt of yours will be taken away and you’ll be left defenceless.”

“But how am I supposed to train if no one is willing to teach me?” Harry asked in frustration, and he could feel the slight sense of panic in the base of his stomach.

Sheridan thought for a moment, glancing up at the head table to where his friend sat watching their conversation intently. “My father once told me when I was very young that to be good at something I needed three things; concentration, determination and lots of practise. A bit of guidance is always helpful but you can’t deny that most of it comes from within. Start by building up your stamina. Go for a run once a day, and push yourself to run longer and faster. Do the same with the weight of a blade. The more you handle it the more natural it’ll feel. When you are working in the corner of Orson’s classes, use your time to see what they do to train, and how they do it. It doesn’t take much attention to polish a sword, as long as you watch out for the sharp bits and don’t cut off any fingers. Analyse their moves, their good points and bad, and take them away to practise on your own. Also read on techniques of solitary practise. Maybe a bit of potions revision into pain-relief tonics will also prove useful, you’ll find that you’ll need them for the first couple of weeks. I don’t know if Kat showed you, but there are a number of labs in one of the buildings behind the library, and you should find any ingredients you will need already there. It’s no secret that Orson will do nothing to help you become worthy of his teaching, but there is no reason you can’t do the work for yourself.”

Harry nodded, and as he let the information and advice Sheridan had just given him sink in he began to feel a fresh gleam of hope.

“Look, I have to go.” Sheridan said, indicating the top table where the masters were beginning to stand and leave the room. “And you better do too if you want to stay healthy. Think about what I’ve said, and I’ll catch up with you when I can, just to check up on you and see how

you are doing.” He said. He patted Harry gently on the shoulder before he stood up and stepped back over the bench. “Good luck, mate.” He said, and then set off down the length of the hall.

The day passed pretty quickly for Harry. He spent most of the morning sitting in the corner of the training hall treating the large number of swords that lined the hall and covertly watching the training that was going on. Today they were focusing on solo efforts, which added to Harry’s growing feeling of determination to do things himself and he made mental notes of how he should perform the moves correctly.

When the afternoon arrived, Harry made his way slowly to the library and took a seat in a dark corner. He sat down gingerly, his wounds still tight across his back, and pulled out a sheet of parchment and a quill that Kat had given him before he had moved into the dormitories. He chewed on a fingernail briefly before inclining his head to one side and starting to draft a letter to send back to his friends to ensure them he was safe.

Once it was complete and the neat copy of the letter had been tied neatly with some string, he smiled slightly and glanced around quickly before turning into a phoenix. He took the rolled up parchment in his claw and sang softly, sending the parchment off with one of his feathers to Grimmauld Place, where he figured Ron and his family would be staying whilst they waited for their house to be rebuilt.

Chapter 24: Another meeting.

"You think they've found anything this time?" Ron asked as he and Hermione made their way out of his room and headed for the stairs.

Hermione shrugged. "I doubt it." she replied. "I'd imagine we would've heard something by now if they had."

Ron nodded in agreement and paused halfway down the stairs as he saw Ginny heading up towards them, her arms wrapped protectively around her body and her eyes red from crying.

"Hey, Gin." Ron said softly, holding his arms out. His sister readily climbed up the last couple of stairs and fell into them, resting her head on his shoulder as they held each other for a few moments.

"Mum still won't let me come to the meeting." She said, pulling away with a sniff. "It's really irritating being the youngest! I'm going to be the only Weasley not in there, and he was my friend too." She sighed. "I just want to know if he's alright."

Hermione nodded, and placed her hand comfortingly against the girl's shoulder. "If there's any news about Harry, we'll tell you," she promised. "But you'll have to understand the other Order business will probably have to stay secret."

Ginny nodded. "Thanks, Hermione." She said, "I appreciate it." she took a deep, steadying breath and wiped her eyes on the back of her sleeve. "I had a couple of owls from Neville and Luna this morning. They read about Harry's disappearance in the Daily Prophet, and wanted to know how we were, and if there was any news."

Hermione looked at Ron. "Maybe we should write to them." She suggested. "After all, they did show their loyalty to Harry in the ministry."

"I don't see what we can tell them that wasn't already in that article." Ron pointed out.

"But they'd appreciate being brought into the loop." Ginny replied. "You know how hard it was last year when no one would tell us anything."

Ron nodded. "Okay." He said. "We'll write to them tonight."

Ginny nodded. "I'm sure they'd appreciate it." she moved past Ron and Hermione and continued up the stairs. "I'll be in my room when you're done." She added quietly and disappeared down the corridor.

Staring after his sister Ron gave a sudden, frustrated cry and balled his fist, hitting it into the banisters a number of times before Hermione stopped him, preventing him from injuring himself. "Ron. Ron!" she said, pulling him close and wrapping her arms around him. "Settle down!"

"I just hate this not knowing." Ron said, frustration evident in his voice. "What with Harry going missing, and Snape telling us that he had been tortured within inches of death, and then there was your dream the other night." He sighed, the fight going out of him as he sagged in Hermione's arms. "I just feel so helpless."

"But we promised Dumbledore we wouldn't try anything." Hermione reminded him gently. "And, to be honest, there isn't really much we can do. Not until we know where he is. All I can suggest is that we keep hoping and praying that he is okay, and hope he'll contact us soon."

Ron nodded slightly, and was unwilling to let go of Hermione's waist as she smiled and gently pushed away from him. "Let's go to the meeting." She said. "Maybe Kingsley and Tonks have brought some news from the ministry."

The two of them continued down the stairs and made their way into the study, taking their seats and nodding a couple of greetings to those they recognised. A few minutes later Dumbledore arrived, Fawkes flying from his shoulder and settling on a perch that had been conjured for him in the corner of the room. They were followed closely by Snape who was supporting the weight of a very faint looking Lupin. As the Order took in Remus' condition they all began to talk at once,

throwing questions at one another and at the three men who took their seats on one side of the long table.

As soon he had seen Remus settle tiredly into his chair, Dumbledore raised his hand to bring quiet to the room. "The mission at Riddle Manor has been compromised." He said. "But I'll let Remus and Severus explain further."

He sat down, nodding to the potions master who threw a concerned glance at the injured werewolf before standing and giving a brief account of the past two days he and Remus had spent hiding in the balcony corridor of the Riddle Manor Hall. "Just as the meeting was about to start, five Death Eaters, including Malfoy and Lestrangle, left the hall...."

"Malfoy?" Hermione interrupted, causing the potions master to glare at her. "But I thought he was apprehended at the ministry with the other Death Eaters?"

Dumbledore shook his head with an icy glint in his eyes. "I'm afraid Minister Fudge let Malfoy go soon after the incident at the ministry. It is evident that there are more important things to Fudge than the safety of other wizards. Money and an influential vote being two of them."

Ron clenched his fist again. "But that's wrong!" he exclaimed.

"But it's life." Snape shot back. "Now, if I may continue?" Ron gave a short nod of his head and the potions master took a deep breath before launching back into his story. "As I said before I was rudely interrupted, the five of them left the hall moments before the meeting started. This in itself is a suspicious occurrence. From past experience I know that the Dark Lord likes a full audience before he starts to entertain. But then this appeared." He threw a feather that he had pulled from his pocket onto the table in front of him, and held up the crumpled parchment that had arrived with it.

"It's the same as mine." Ron exclaimed, pulling his own crumpled feather out of his pocket and holding next to the other one to compare the two. He had been reluctant to leave the feather in his room, and

was often caught by members of his family and Hermione gently stroking the golden plume as a reminder of his missing friend.

Snape nodded, "and the message that came with it was written by Harry, also." He said, ignoring the shocked looks of the Hogwarts students as he used Harry's first name. "It simply says "Get out of there, they can see you." and is signed with his initials." He passed the parchment to Kingsley who sat on his right, letting the other Order members examine it. "We both recalled the truth in the warning that appeared at the Burrow," he continued, watching the parchment make its way around the circle. "And so we both took heed, and made to escape. Even with the warning we were cutting it fine, and Lupin was hit by one of Avery's daggers, though we were able to get far enough away from the wards to activate the portkey Albus had given us." As he spoke he pulled a silver knife from his pocket and threw it onto the table next to the feather. "I think you'll find that to be the one of the knives that turned Potter's torso into a sadistic work of art." He added, and sat back down.

Silence fell on the room as they digested what Snape had just told them. Hermione, her mind working faster than most, spoke up first. "What do you think he meant by "they can see you"?" she asked.

"I'd imagine he had a vision of some sort." Dumbledore replied. "These have always observed from the immediate vicinity around Voldemort, sometimes even through his own eyes. Before Harry disappeared, he spoke with Lupin and told him that these visions were getting more frequent, from both point of views. He was supposed to be coming to Hogwarts to work on his Occlumency with me, I can only hope he gets an opportunity to learn wherever he is now."

Hermione nodded slightly, and took a deep breath before speaking again. "Do you think he might be strong enough to cause other people to have visions?" she asked. Ron looked at her, realising what she was getting at, and reached over to hold her hand as a sign of support. Hermione flashed him a quick smile before explaining further. "I mean, he gets these visions from Voldemort via his scar, but do you think he's strong enough to cause other people to see what he

sees, even though they aren't connected to him by any obvious magical means?"

Dumbledore narrowed his eyes at the female Gryffindor and leant forward slightly. "What are you saying, Ms Granger?" he asked.

Hermione glanced around at all the eyes focused on her, and licked her lips nervously. "I had a dream a couple of days ago. It was of Harry. He was in a large room, with some other boys, and a beast of a man was standing in front of him. I think must've been a teacher of some sort."

"And what happened in this dream?" Dumbledore asked.

Hermione drew in a shaky breath. "He was being beaten." She said. "He was made to stand with his arms out in front." She dropped Ron's hand and held up her own arms to demonstrate. "And was holding a book in his hands. He was told not to let the book drop below the level of his shoulders, and then was caned across his forearms." She shook her head slightly. "The pain was intense, but he refused to give in. Just stood there and took the blows. It seemed so unlike normal nightmares that I wondered whether or not he might have been thinking about me and Ron at the time and projected his thoughts out to us?"

"Did Mr Weasley have a similar vision?" Dumbledore asked, turning to Ron.

Ron shook his head. "I was awake at the time." He admitted. "I was thinking through a few things."

The headmaster nodded his head in understanding. "It could well be a vision." He admitted. "But I'm afraid that there isn't much in the way of detail that we can use to rescue or contact Harry."

Hermione nodded. "That's what I thought." She said. "But I was just wondering."

“Let me know if you, either of you, have another dream like this. After seeing what Harry was capable of in Privet Drive, I’d say anything could be possible.”

The two Hogwarts students nodded their promises, and Dumbledore moved the meeting onto other reports, finding out more about what was going on at the ministry from Tonks and Kingsley, and Bill Weasley spoke of his negotiations with the goblins at Gringotts.

After Charlie Weasley had taken his seat after talking about the possibility of introducing dragons back onto the grounds of Hogwarts, an idea that Hagrid seemed particularly eager to support, Dumbledore stood to draw the meeting to a close.

“I have nothing more to add to this meeting that has not already been said today or at previous meetings.” He started. “We all know Voldemort is getting stronger daily, both in a magical sense and in confidence. I fear it won’t be long before he drops his search for Harry and sets his sights higher, attacking the ministry, the hospitals and the schools.” He let the silence fill the room as each member of the Order contemplated his words.

He took a deep breath to speak again, but hesitated as the silence was broken by the faint sound of phoenix song. He glanced over to Fawkes, who had raised his head and had inclined it to one side, as if concentrating on the sound. It was clear that the phoenix in the room was not the origin of the warm song.

The tune began to grow louder, and the members began to glance at one another before a small flash of flame appeared in the centre of the table, and a heavy roll of yellow parchment fell from the air, a single phoenix feather floating down to land innocently on top of it as the phoenix song died away.

The Order members stared in shock at the scroll, many experiencing an increasing sense of dread as they compared the feather to the one that still lay on the table from when Snape had placed down previously.

Dumbledore's hand shook slightly as he reached out to pull the scroll closer. He carefully lifted the feather and gently placed it to one side before lifting the rolled parchment and inspecting it. There was no address or name written upon it, though a quick sketch of a lightning bolt had been made on one side of the roll, which made the headmaster smile softly.

Hermione noticed the soft twinkle appear in her headmaster's eyes and spoke out into the silence. "Is it from Harry?" she asked.

Dumbledore looked up at her and nodded. "And I believe that this is more of a social letter than his previous correspondence." He said as pulled at the string and unrolled the parchment. He quickly glanced over the first few paragraphs before smiling even more. "It's not addressed to anyone specific," he said to the occupants of the room who were leaning forward in baited anticipation. "So I shall read it aloud.

"Dear All. I'm sorry that this letter isn't directed to any one person in particular, but as you all deserve to know how I am, and what I am doing, and so I decided that a general letter was needed, though I may add a few personal notes at the end.

"As for how I am, there is no need to worry: I'm fine! I know that this information will be a relief to some and do nothing but increase the anxiety in those that really know me, but I beg you not to worry too much. I admit that these past few weeks have not been the best in my life, and I have lost count of the number of times I wished some of you could have been there to help me through it. But I feel things will get a lot worse before the end of this war.

"I'm sure Snape has explained to you what happened at Tom's. I was injured badly and I guess I must've gotten confused as I apparated out of there. I am assuming that Snape did eventually end up at Hogwarts, as I saw him with Remus in a vision. What possessed him to go back to Riddle Manor I don't know, but I'm glad you are both safe. I, however, ended up here. Though where exactly "here" is I don't know, so I can't really tell you. All you need to know is that this place has been hidden for hundreds of years, and I'm sure you could appreciate how hard that would make it for a certain person to locate

me. For the meantime, I aim to keep it that way, but I promise to return when I can.

“As for what I am up to – I’m afraid that must also remain a secret. I suspect that many of you will notice some changes when I return. The power that I unleashed at the Dursley’s was immense, and hurt like hell, but I haven’t experienced it since so I’m guessing it was a one-off, or something that only happens when I’m faced with Tom. I have, however, discovered a few neat tricks, and I can’t wait to show them to you when I return. One of them, I’m sure Professor Dumbledore, and Snape to a lesser extent, would appreciate, is my mastery of Occlumency. It was suggested that I try a different approach to “shutting down my mind” and mastered it almost instantly (don’t be too shocked, Snape, I have discovered that I’m pretty good at picking things up when I put my mind to it...). Though there is no one here who can test me with Legilimens, I’ve found that the only time I experience a vision now is when I’ve been injured, I guess that’s because I don’t have a chance to prepare before I slip into unconsciousness.

“That really doesn’t sound good does it? Honestly, don’t worry about me, I’m not on my own here, and there are people keeping an eye over me. Let Hermione know that I am continuing with my studies, and that there is the biggest library here... And if you can let Ron know that he is welcome to use my Firebolt in this year’s quidditch games, if it survived the blast that is. And tell him that I’ve discovered something that brings a whole new perspective to flying!

“The only thing I really have left to say is to Mr and Mrs Weasley... Arthur, Molly, I’m really sorry about what happened at the Burrow, I only wish that I there was more I could’ve done to save it. All I can suggest is that you use some the money I have in my vault at Gringotts so that you can rebuild as soon as possible. I know you won’t accept the money as a gift, so think of it as a permanent loan in return for the love and support you and your family have given me over the years. The only condition I want to include is that you build it just as it was, and that you welcome me home whenever I come to visit.

“I’m going to say goodbye now, but I do hope that you take me up on my offer, and that this letter has lowered the amount of worry you others may have. I’m not sure when I can write again, but I promise you that I’m working hard to learn all I can before I’m ready to return. I’m determined not to fail you guys, as you all mean so much to me and I miss you all loads. I can’t wait to see you again. Harry.”

Chapter 25: Going Solo.

Harry felt a lot more at ease since he had sent the letter to his friends, assuring them of his safety, and eagerly awaited the time when he could start the physical training program he had made out for himself. But the wounds on his back were taking a long time to heal, unlike the ones he had recovered from when he had first arrived at the school. He put it down to the fact that he hadn't had any of Kat's help with the wounds inflicted by his duel with Orson, and in the evenings after his classes he spent his time divided between the library and the potions laboratories in the buildings behind it, working on healing potions and muscle relaxants that he believed he might need once he started his training.

He particularly became interested in researching the magical properties of the phoenix, and how wizards could use them for their own devices. In one library session, he found a book that identified a large number of magical ingredients used in potions and spells, and spent that evening lying on his bed reading it, ignoring the movements of the other boys around him as they readied themselves for bed. He was surprised to find so little written about the properties of ingredients obtained from the phoenix and supposed that this was due to the fact that the fiery bird, like so many other magical creatures, steered well clear of anyone who might be likely to cash in on their powers. It made sense that the more the magical creature distanced itself from wizards, the less people would know about them and the less likely they would be hunted.

Most of the entries he found concentrated on phoenix tears, which were used primarily for healing potions, but the only relevant piece of information that the books seemed to give other than detailed descriptions of the colour and texture of the tears was that the more phoenix tears in a potion, the stronger the healing properties of that potion, with pure phoenix tears being the most potent. He also found a small number of entries on the properties of the phoenix feather, but again, these were limited mainly to descriptions and their use in the making of wands. One entry did catch his eye, though, and that was on the properties of phoenix blood;

“The magical properties of phoenix blood are unknown, primarily due to the fact that a phoenix becomes very unwilling when asked to donate some, and betraying a phoenix’s trust to take some by force can cause the phoenix to retaliate physically, going to the extent that it would willingly give its own life in the effort to defend itself, and the bonds of trust can never be repaired. It can be assumed, however, that phoenix blood can be just as potent as its tears, though whether this is also in the arts of healing, or another field is not known. The small samples of phoenix blood that have been collected – most probably from forceful means – have been known to react significantly with phoenix song, suggesting that there is a relationship between the two. But whether it is the song that triggers the magic in the phoenix blood, or if it just increases its magical potency is unknown.”

Harry mused on this entry for a while. It made sense that the song affected the blood, as phoenix song had the same effect on wizarding blood to some extent, enabling a warm feeling to flow through their veins, and calming the wizard or giving them strength as needed. Harry supposed the type of song was what triggered the specific reactions. He thought back to when he had sent the phoenix feather with his song. All he had done was use his will to send the parchment away, and the song had come naturally. He concluded that phoenix song was the equivalent of wizard’s wandless magic, where you silently willed whatever it was you wanted to happen to such an extent that incantations were seldom needed. Of course, there were limits on how much you were able to achieve by this method, and much of it relied upon the strength of the wizard. If a whole army of Death Eaters attacked, Harry mused, it would be wishful thinking to be able to get rid of them all in one blast of wandless magic; that would take a colossal amount of power. Rather you would have to take them down individually, or two at a time.

He marked the page in the book as the last light in the room was turned out and promised himself he would find someone to take a sample of his blood whilst he was in phoenix form so that he could examine its properties further. He didn’t assume for one moment that his blood would be as pure as that of a real phoenix, but he figured that he must have some of its properties due to the increase of his

skin temperature, his healed myopia and his amazing abilities to heal when he had first arrived at the Marcello school.

He frowned slightly as he settled on his side in the dark, thinking back to when Kat had taken the bandages off him a couple of days after he had arrived. She had seemed surprised when they had found the wounds were healed, indicating that the miracle hadn't been due to anything she had applied to the wounds or soaked the bandages in. Harry scratched the back of his neck, wincing slightly as the stretch across his shoulders started off another bout of irritation from the tight wound, and his eyes opened wide with the introduction of a thought. The twenty-four hours before they had taken off the bandages, Harry had been subjected to a large amount of discomfort from the itchy feeling as his wounds mended themselves, and he had been fidgeting around the bed, trying to find a comfortable position to lie in and wishing that the annoyance would go away.

"Surely it can't be that easy?"

Harry quickly held his breath when he realised he had spoken his thoughts out loud. The other boys in the dormitory were fast asleep by this time, their deep and constant breathing reassuring Harry that he hadn't woken anyone up.

Harry breathed deeply and snuggled further under his blankets. What if he had just wished the wounds away that time, in his eagerness to start his training and the discomfort they had given them when he was trying to sleep? He supposed that it could be interpreted as a type of wandless magic, similar to the time he wished he was somewhere safe from his cousin, Dudley, and had ended up on the school roof, though he didn't recall ever hearing of a wizard being able to heal himself in such a way. After all, if all wizards were able to get better with such ease, why were there wizarding hospitals like St Mungo's?

He decided it wouldn't hurt to try, especially if it meant that he was able to start training sooner, and closed his eyes, concentrating on the feel of the wound that stretched across his shoulder blades and wishing to himself that it would disappear.

After a few moments of nothing happening he became impatient, calling himself stupid for even thinking that it was even possible to do such a thing, and instead pushed himself to fall into his centre to rid himself of all thoughts before he drifted off to sleep.

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In the morning, Harry woke to the noise of the other boys moving about the room. He slowly sat up, rubbing his eyes and yawning, before pulling his arms above his head to stretch out his stiff back.

He froze in mid-stretch, not breathing and for the briefest of moments was unaware of what it was that was wrong with the situation. He quickly realised that there was no longer any pain in his shoulders, and all his thoughts from the night before rushed back to him as he let his arms drop to his side and he raced into the bathroom, pulling up his night-shirt and spinning so that he could see his back in the mirror above the sink.

He earned a few stares from his dorm mates at his actions, but ignored them as he examined the vivid red, recently healed scar that ran across his back. A smile broke across his face as he examined his other, smaller wounds over his arms from when he had first been beaten and was elated to find that they, too, had healed to an extent, though it was clear all his wounds would leave some sort of scarring.

With a light feeling in his chest, Harry quickly washed his face, ran his hand through his unruly hair, quickly tying the longer strands into a short tail, and gave his reflection a quick smile before rushing back to his bed to get changed and follow the other boys to breakfast, silently working out what he would do that afternoon to start his training.

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The day passed slowly, as it always does when in anticipation for something. As soon as Orson let his class out, ignoring Harry as always, the former Hogwarts student discretely followed the boys back out into the corridor but headed away from the dining hall, instead choosing to walk out into the hot summer's sun to plan out his running route and to find a place to train.

He followed peacefully along the animal paths that ran through the wood, keeping an ear out for anything dangerous that might attack him and occasionally practising his wandless magic by moving branches and levitating rocks out of his way.

The large wood was light and calm, with birds singing high in the trees and the sun sending bright beams down through the branches to highlight the path Harry was walking along. It was a brilliant contrast to his past experiences of walking through the Forbidden Forest back at Hogwarts, and Harry doubted he would come across a nest of Acromantulas or wild Ford Anglia's here. Instead, the atmosphere brought a smile to Harry's face, and he started hunting for a place to practise his swordsmanship, keeping half an eye out for creatures he suited more to this place, like squirrels, deer and possibly even unicorns.

He walked for over half an hour before he came to the banks of a lake. It was about the same size as that which fronted his old school, and was as calm as a mirror, easily reflecting the bright blue of the sky with the occasional cotton-puff of cloud hanging from it. He stood for a few moments, just watching and listening to the calm sounds of nature before making his way to the left, following more animal paths around the circumference of the lake.

He vaguely remembered Leo telling him that he had been found by a lake when he had arrived, and he supposed he must've been found somewhere around here. As he strolled along, he realised that the track he was following seemed pretty level, and smiled to himself, thinking that a couple of laps of the lake every morning before breakfast, and the occasional evening before bed, would soon increase his fitness in the way that Sheridan had suggested. From the lack of human-shoe prints on the path he was walking he assumed that not many of the boys had explored this far, and what could be more pleasant than running through scenery such as this?

Before long, Harry had reached the opposite side of the lake, and had come across a large clearing the trees that lined the lake, with a large rock that overhung the water. Harry quickly climbed up onto the rock

and sat down, letting his feet dangle inches above the still water and breathed in deeply, taking in the smells of the forest around him.

Since coming to the school, Harry had discovered that he had changed a lot from the broody and irritable boy he had been during his fifth year. He found himself to be a lot calmer, and less likely to get frustrated or angry about his thoughts, or the irksome stares he was getting from his peers in his dormitory and at meal times.

He at first thought this may have been due to the death of his godfather making him more subdued, though he realised that he hadn't really been in control of his emotions at the beginning of the summer, rather he was just numb from the shock of losing the chance to be part of a normal wizarding family. He then thought the change may have occurred during his time with Voldemort and his henchmen, where he had soon found that the more he fought back, the harder they laughed and the more painful the torture had become. He had soon learnt to bite his tongue, though his Gryffindor spirit had refused to let him give in to Voldemort's requests of uniting with him against the rest of the wizarding world. Now he figured it was more due to his taking on of his animagus qualities. Like he had explained to Kat before his vision of the attack on the Burrow, it was almost as if he was becoming part of the phoenix, rather than the phoenix form taking on his own characteristics.

He brow creased slightly in thought as he watched a kingfisher race across the calm waters like a bolt of blue light. What if the ability to turn into a phoenix was the power mentioned in the decree? The way Dumbledore had spoken of it, Harry had assumed that his power had had something to do with what was locked up behind that door of the ministry. And, seeing the other rooms were dedicated to the fundamentals of existence like time and death, that the room in question was dedicated to the ability to love. Wasn't that what had dispelled Voldemort from his body when he had possessed him? His love that he had felt for Sirius?

Harry swung his legs a little bit, causing a doe and her fawn to raise their heads in alarm to assess how dangerous he was before dropping their heads once more to quench their thirst. He tried a new approach to thinking about the problem. He had never heard nor

read of a phoenix that had a bad nature or had trusted a person who was known to be involved with dark magic. Dumbledore's book had certainly indicated that the phoenix was an epitome of light magic, and this was probably the reason the headmaster had chosen it to represent the fight against Voldemort. So maybe the two ideas went together and the phoenix was a symbol of empathy and love. That would mean that his ability to transform into a phoenix indicated that he had discovered the "power the Dark Lord knows not".

Harry frowned again. Even if his ability to turn into a phoenix was the power he was looking for, how was he supposed to use this to his advantage? It seemed to him the only things that phoenix were good for was to heal injuries after they had happened, pass along messages without fear of interception, and renew themselves once every couple of months in a ball of flames. He screwed his face up at the thought of a burning day. What if he was expected to go through such a procedure? The idea of being immortal was appealing, but to spontaneously combust and emerge from the ashes as a naked babe?

He snorted and shook his head slightly, thinking how stupid the concept was before pulling himself from his thoughts and getting to his feet. He climbed back over the rock and jumped lightly to the ground before carefully walking around the glade, examining its appropriateness to be used for his private training area.

As he neared the line of trees set back from the water's edge, he became aware that his feet were following a straight white line that stretched across the glade. He fell to his knees and gently brushed some of the forest debris away to discover a chalked line marking the boundary of something. He quickly moved around the clearing, sometimes brushing away the dead leaves and dirt with his hands, at other times using his wandless magic to levitate larger stones out of the way. Before long, his eyes opened wide as he realised the significance of what he was uncovering; the markings were the same as those on the floor of the training halls and amphitheatre, designed to help with balance and footwork as you practised.

Harry immediately shot to his feet, his eyes warily examining the trees behind him, and suddenly very self-conscious of the fact he was infringing on someone else's private training area.

After a couple of moments where nothing moved except the branches in the slight breeze, he laughed to himself, his fears passing. The glade had obviously been neglected for sometime, hence the chalk pattern work on the floor had been covered over by the leaves that had fallen from the trees. He smiled to himself, and the determination that had flowed through his veins since he had arrived at Marcello renewed with a greater fervour, as he perceived Fate to be playing on his side for once.

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Chapter 26: Hogwarts Express.

“Okay, people, settle down now.” The hubbub of the prefect compartment on the Hogwarts Express died away as head girl Cho Chang held up her hands to get peoples’ attention. “Welcome back to a new year at Hogwarts.” She started.

“And welcome to the new fifth year prefects.” Josh Bishop, the tall Hufflepuff who was head boy added. “Before we take the newcomers aside to explain your duties, we have a few general announcements to make.”

Cho nodded. “I’m sure you are all aware of the dangers that have been reported in the Daily Prophet over the summer. You-Know-Who has returned, and because of this Dumbledore has given us some extra duties just to make sure that the students stay safe.”

“Cho and I had a meeting with him in the Leaky Cauldron last week.” Josh continued. “And I won’t pretend that what he told us didn’t scare me. Hogwarts, to most of us, is the safest place we know. And even though that may do something to reassure you, you must also be made aware that it makes us the prime target for You-Know-Who’s attacks.”

Cho spoke above the gasps and sudden mutterings that erupted around the compartment. “Because of this, Dumbledore wants us all to be extra vigilant this year, and has put into place several new rules. Quidditch practises will be limited to daylight hours only,” she held up her hand again at some of the protests. “Though he did say that spot-lit practises could possibly be organised, but only with supervision from a professor. He also wants prefects to become firmer when applying curfews. From now on, absolutely no one is allowed outside their common room after nine o’clock, unless they have written permission or a legit written explanation from a professor. Prefects will be patrolling from then until midnight, just to make sure students keep to these rules. And a professor or Filch will be patrolling from midnight until day-break. Josh and I have worked out an initial rota for this.” She watched as he fellow head started to hand out the pieces of parchment. “These will be changed fortnightly, and if you have any

special requests or problems then come and see Josh or myself and we'll try and sort them."

"Dumbledore has always been one for allowing students an element of freedom." Josh said, once more taking his place besides Cho. "And I'm sure you can all appreciate the severity of the situation due to the fact he has found it necessary to make these rules. He has also told us to warn the students that, if the curfew is broken for some reason, then he will go as far as to introduce a role-call to be held in the common-rooms every night at nine o'clock." He shook his head as the protestations started up again. "I know it sounds harsh. But he is only thinking about the safety of the students." His eyes darted to where Ron, Hermione and Ginny sat at the back of the crowd along one wall. "He is being particularly cautious due to what has happened over the summer. He doesn't want any of us to get hurt."

"Which is why he wants us to continue the DA." Cho said, her eyes also flitting to where the three Gryffindors sat. She took a slightly shaky breath, and bit her bottom lip nervously, before continuing. "For those of you don't know, last year Harry Potter started a defence club, where we practised the practical side of defence due to the substandard teaching we were getting. Even though Professor Lupin is more than capable of teaching us defence, he feels we ought to open this group to all prefects, and any of the older students who want extra practise. This would give us the opportunity for some practical experience, and make us feel more confident if and when we are faced with danger."

There was a general increase in positive conversation when the prefects heard that Remus Lupin had returned to teach at the school. But the excited murmurings soon died when they recalled the rest of Cho's words and they spotted the two Weasleys and Hermione sitting quietly in the corner.

"But whose going to run it?" Ernie Macmillan asked from Hufflepuff, looking awkward and uncomfortable. "I mean, doesn't You-Know-Who still...well, you know."

The room fell silent again, and Ron, Hermione and Ginny once more found themselves the focus of their gazes.

“Voldemort hasn’t got Harry.” Ron made everyone jump, with both the suddenness of his statement cutting through the silence and his use of the Dark Lord’s name. “He escaped earlier this summer. Though he was hurt pretty bad.”

“So he’s safe?” Hannah Abbot asked, her voice full of hope. “Why didn’t the Daily Prophet say anything? When will he be well enough to come back to school?”

“We didn’t say anything about knowing where he is.” Ginny said.

“All we know is that he was disappeared from Voldemort’s circle...” Hermione said.

“Saving Snape’s esteemed arse whilst he was at it.” Ron added in a low voice.

“... and we haven’t seen him since.” Hermione finished, sending the male Weasley a warning look. “All the information we know is from a letter he sent us just over a week ago, saying that he was safe for the meantime, and that he’d return home when he’s ready.”

“Ready for what?” one of the older prefects asked.

The trio shrugged, and Colin piped up excitedly. “I bet he’s secretly training, ready to defend Hogwarts when You-Know-Who comes....”

“Oh, Puh-leese.” The group turned to see Draco Malfoy sitting in the corner by the window with Pansy Parkinson and the other Slytherin prefects, his arms crossed his chest and his characteristic sneer was on his face. “You really think that that pathetic loser can beat the Dark Lord, the most powerful wizard in a century? Did you have any idea what they did to him? How he reacted? I heard that he was turned into a quivering wreck and crying for his parents when they did nothing more than hold a knife to his throat! And that was just the start of it! He’d never beat the Dark Lord.”

“But he was strong enough to escape through his anti-apparation wards.” Ron argued forcefully, leaping to his feet and causing many of the other prefects to look at him with wide eyes.

“He was running scared.” Draco calmly shot back in a slow drawl. “When Snape was discovered as Dumbledore’s spy, Potter realised that his last line of protection was gone. And now he has experienced first hand what the Dark Lord is capable of he’ll probably stay in hiding. I wouldn’t hold out much hope for your hero now.”

“Harry would never desert us.” Ginny said in a voice trembling with heated passion as she went to stand next to her brother. “He has more courage than you and your father put together. He has no reason to stay away.”

Draco raised an eyebrow and stood up, crossing the compartment steadily to stand in front of the two red-heads. “Really?” he asked, and Ron’s fists clenched at his oily voice. “Well, it seems that I’m better informed than you are, Weasley. For I know what was in that prophecy you were so keen to get your hands on at the ministry last year, and Potter has every right to be scared.”

Ron and Hermione’s jaws fell open at Draco’s claim. “How do you know about the prophecy?” she asked with a gasp.

“My father tells me everything.” He said with a smile, misinterpreting their shock. “Let me see now... “The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches...born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies...” It seems to me that Potter’s luck ran out when he unbelievably vanquished the Dark Lord when he was a baby. But it didn’t last, and now the Dark Lord is back and looking for revenge. I’d say Potter has gone and inadvertently done the Gryffindor thing, sacrificing himself and directing attention away from the school to buy time for Dumbledore to work out some sort of protection. But that won’t last long. As soon as he’s dead, the Dark Lord will head straight back for Hogwarts!”

“Harry wouldn’t do that!” Ron shouted, shaking in his attempt to control his anger. “He would stand and fight alongside the rest of us. He knows we can look after ourselves.”

Draco raised his eyebrow again, and looked down at Ron's bare arms, still bearing the faint scars he had received when fighting the brains in the ministry. "Evidently." He murmured simply.

Ron snarled and leapt forward, his sister on his heels, before a stiff arm across his chest stopped him, sending Ginny careening into his shoulder. "I suggest you leave, Malfoy." Cho said coldly from where she stood to the left of Josh. "And don't forget that we are perfectly within our rights to confiscate your badge for what you have said today."

Malfoy continued the staring match with Ron, seemingly ignoring the Head-girl's words.

"Malfoy." Josh's warning tone diverted his gaze for an instance, before he sneered again.

"I'll go and start the first patrol then, shall I?" he said, pushed past the two heads, and disappeared out into the corridor, the other Slytherin prefects following his lead.

The room fell silent once more as he left, until Ron turned to Cho. "We'll run it," he said.

"Huh?" Cho responded, momentarily confused.

"Ron!" Hermione shouldered Josh aside and placed her hand on Ron's arm. "Don't listen to him, Ron." She dropped her voice slightly, so that only he could hear her. "You know that wasn't the complete prophecy."

Ron turned to her and leant in to speak into her ear. "Even so, Malfoy was right. Just because they don't know the whole thing won't stop Voldemort from targeting Harry simply for who he is." He took a deep breath and continued in a louder voice. "I've promised myself that I'm going to stick by Harry, and I'm going to do just that. By running the DA we can get better at duelling, and I can stand by Harry's side when Voldemort comes knocking." He sniffed a bit. "I won't let Harry face Him alone again."

“So that’s settled then?” Josh asked cautiously, looking to Hermione.

The Gryffindor looked deeply into Ron’s dark eyes before smiling slightly. “I guess means there’ll be three of us standing behind that door.” She said.

“Four!” Ginny corrected with a smile. “He was my friend too.”

“And anyone can join this club?” an older Ravenclaw who hadn’t been in the DA the year before asked.

“We should probably limit it to fifth years and above.” Cho said. “The younger students should be kept protected, rather than be trained to fight.”

“What about Slytherins?” a soft voice asked from the back of the group, and they turned to see a blonde haired girl standing there, the green and silver crest of the segregated house standing out boldly on her chest. “I appreciate that not all of us are welcome, but I could vouch for a few that are against You-Know-Who and his ambitions. We are in Slytherin because we are cunning and devious, not because we have fool-hardy desires for power and to rid the world of those less worthy.” She smiled slightly. “You might even find our traits remotely useful.”

Hermione made quick eye contact with Cho and Ginny before looking at Ron who didn’t know whether to scorn the girl’s words or look amazed at her nerve to speak in such a way. “Remember what the sorting hat said last year?” she asked, looking around the circle of prefects. “That we must unite in order to become strong? Maybe its time that we let this rivalry go the best we can. Fighting between ourselves will only help Voldemort achieve his goals.”

“I can scout out the other Slytherins for you.” The girl offered. “I know of a definite few who will stand with us, and we can offer membership only to those that prove their worth.”

Cho smiled grimly. “Just get them to sign that contract of Hermione’s,” she said. “Then we’ll soon see who stands with us.”

Hermione blushed defensively. "I did warn you in advance..." she started, but Cho shook her head and smiled, with a hint of apology in her look, causing Hermione to fall silent.

"So, what do you say?" Josh asked, turning to Ron. "As new leader of the DA, whatever you say goes."

Ron's eyes opened wide. "Leader?" he asked. "But... Hermione... I thought..."

"Oh, she'll be in her element researching new things for us to learn." Ginny said with a grin at her brother's embarrassment. "But that's a full time job! We'll need someone else to organise the evenings and take charge of events. Someone who has a sharp mind for forward planning and strategy." She winked at her brother and her grin grew wider. "Who better for the job?"

Ron, suddenly aware of the attention he was getting, put his hands in his pockets, hunched his shoulders and let the tips of his ears turn red. "Well, I guess it'll be okay." He said and the Slytherin girl smiled in appreciation. "But no insulting other members, no causing unplanned fights, and no Malfoy." He added firmly.

"Sure." The Slytherin grinned and held out her hand. "Jessica Gage."

Ron hesitantly took her hand and shook. "Ron Weasley." He replied and the girl snorted slightly.

"As if I didn't already know." She said. Ron carefully kept his face neutral, suspecting her next words would claim that she knew him for his friendship with Harry. He was pleasantly shocked at her reply; "Those were some impressive saves you made last year..."

Chapter 27: Making new friends.

Harry sat at the long breakfast table, his attention divided between his bowl of cereal and the large book he had propped up between the jug of pumpkin juice and a stack of toast. After a few moments he sighed and gave up on his attempt at multitasking, choosing to finish of the last few mouthfuls of his food before pushing aside his bowl and pulling the book forward.

The last month had fallen into a sort of daily routine for Harry. Already that morning, as he did every other, he had been for a run around the lake, and had returned for a quick shower before breakfast. He read as much as he could during the short break between eating and lessons, when he followed the other boys to the training hall to sit in the corner and clean weapons until the session was over. His afternoons were usually spent partly down by the lake, swinging one of the swords Sheridan had managed to sneak away for him to practise on, or working hard in the library, researching to the best of his ability everything he could to do with phoenixes and what they were capable of, as well more general curses and techniques of wandless magic that he would practise down by the lake before bed every evening.

He hadn't planned on changing this routine today, not until he acknowledged another person coming to sit next to him.

"Hey-up, Pi" Harry looked up and smiled at Sheridan. "Haven't seen you for a long time, what you reading?"

Sheridan reached over and pulled the cover of the book towards him, placing his hand subconsciously between the pages so that he didn't lose Harry's page. "Hogwarts: A history?" he asked with a slight frown. "Isn't that the school you used to go to?"

Harry nodded. "I found it in the library here, and thought I'd read it." Harry was slightly surprised to find his voice a little croaky, though he supposed it was due to the fact he hadn't spoken to anyone for days. "I have a friend back at home that would swear by this book. Carried it with her everywhere in the first year." Sheridan raised his eyebrow and let out a snort of laughter. Harry shrugged. "There is actually a lot

of useful information in here, and I'd say this old book was hiding some secrets, if you read between the lines that is." He looked back down to the page on the apparation barriers around Hogwarts that he had been reading. Hermione was right, it said quite clearly that you couldn't apparate into Hogwarts. But, with all the critical thinking Harry had been doing with his research on phoenixes, Harry wondered what the rules were about apparating around Hogwarts grounds. After all it said you couldn't apparate into Hogwarts, it didn't say anything about apparating within the barriers that already surrounded the school.

"Anyway." Sheridan interrupted his thoughts with his voice. "Why are you working? Don't you know what day it is today?" Harry thought for a few moments before shaking his head in a clueless way. "It's the first Sunday of the month." Sheridan told him, as if that would answer Harry's unspoken question.

Harry's eyes opened wide. "September?" he asked, his thoughts immediately full of his friends climbing onto the Hogwarts Express, dragging their trunks on behind them. He wondered if they still thought of him, if they were still worried about him. He mentally shook his head. Of course they would be; they were his friends. He bit his bottom lip as a sudden sensation of guilt passed through him, and thought about the possibility of sending them another message to let them know he was still okay and safe.

Sheridan waved his hand in front of Harry's face. "Where you go?" he asked with a smile. "It's relaxation day!" He continued when he had regained Harry's attention. "Every first Sunday a small group of us get together to relax for the day. We usually spend the day either mucking around playing some sort of game like quidditch, or, even better, going for a run."

Harry frowned slightly. "And that's what you do to relax?" he asked, thinking of the agony he had pushed himself through every morning as he ran around the lake. "I mean, the quidditch I understand, but running?"

Sheridan grinned before standing up and pulling Harry up from the table by his arm. "Impressive," he said, giving Harry's arm a quick

squeeze, feeling the hardening muscles underneath the shirt. "Have you been working out?" Harry gave him a withering look and Sheridan's grin grew wider. "Right." He said and started walking to the main doors. "C'mon, from what I gather you have been working yourself pretty hard recently and could do with a bit of a break. And there are a couple of people that really want you to come with us today."

"Who?" Harry asked, as he followed Sheridan gracefully down the main steps of the building. Since he had started running he had surprised himself by feeling more balanced and in control of his body as he moved, and now imagined himself to walk very much in the way he had seen the other boys do that first morning in the corridor. "And where are you taking me?"

"Horus, Kat and myself get together with a few others in the fields behind the school." Sheridan replied, leading Harry past the boys' dormitory building. "From there, we usually go wherever the wind takes us."

"Kat?" Harry asked, his ears seeming to perk up at her name. Sheridan grinned. "I didn't think she was allowed to mix with the students?"

"Oh, her daddy trusts Horus and myself around her." He said. "Though I don't think he knows about the other lads."

"Oh, are you and her..." Harry looked at the ground as he walked. "You know... together?"

Sheridan laughed and slapped Harry on the back. "No chance." He said.

Harry looked up at him, a little bit confused at the boy's mirth. "Horus?" he asked tentatively.

"No way!" Sheridan stopped walking and turned to Harry. "Horus and I are together." He said, with a smile that had an element of apprehension, waiting for Harry's reaction. "That's why old Orson

doesn't give a damn about us hanging around with his precious baby girl. He knows we wouldn't try anything."

Harry looked a little bit confused for a moment, before realisation dawned. "What about the rest of the boys we're meeting?" he asked a little nervously, wondering if they were all the same way inclined as Sheridan and Horus.

"Oh, they're all straight." Sheridan assured him. "Though, as I said, I don't think Kat's father knows that they come with us on these monthly romps. Probably best if he didn't, if you know what I mean."

Harry nodded and started walking, before he caught Sheridan throwing short glances at him from the corner of his eye. "What?" he asked, stopping to face him again.

"Are you gay?" Sheridan asked. Harry screwed up his face slightly in revulsion, then, realising what he was doing, he blanked his expression and shook his head.

"No offence or anything," he said. "But I'm not really interested."

"But you have nothing against gays?" he asked.

Harry shrugged. "Don't think I've ever really met any, until now." He said. "As long as they don't try hitting on me, then I don't see any harm in it."

The boys turned as they heard laughter coming from the path behind them. Harry smiled brightly as Horus and Kat walked up, Horus slipping an arm around his boyfriend's shoulders and flashing Harry a smile. "You shouldn't have told 'Dan that." He said. "He'll wind you up something chronic."

Harry looked at Sheridan apprehensively, as if the boy was about to jump on him. "Ah, I'm not that bad." The boy said, with a dismissive wave of his hand. "Though they don't call me a "stud" for nothing."

Kat laughed again, and Harry was entranced by the musical sound of her voice. He mentally shook himself, telling himself that it was only

because he hadn't been around any other girls for the past month, and wondered how she coped with so many hormonal teenage boys in one place. That's probably why she carries a blade around with her all the time, he thought with a smile.

"They only call you a stud because of your animagus form." Kat pointed out.

"Oh, I don't know." Horus said, looking into his lover's eyes and leaning forward for a kiss. "Hung like a horse, this one is!"

Harry watched, slightly shocked at the image as their lips met, before he felt a tug on his arm, and Kat led him away from the scene. "Lets go," she said. "Leave them to it."

"Are they always like that?" Harry asked, trying not to be too aware of the fact that Kat's arm was still linked with his.

She shrugged slightly. "They don't really get much of a chance to show their affection to one another here." She said. "It's not only because Horus is a master and Sheridan is still a student, but because most of the other boys are against it. They don't want to direct any of the highly charged emotions that run through the school to themselves, if you know what I mean."

Harry thought back to a week previously, when he had come across a commotion in one of the school halls. There had been a stand off between two of the students, and they had duelled, using blades, wandless magic and their animagus abilities to try to score the upper hand. All around them, the cheers and encouragement from the other students drove them on, until the fight had ended when one of the boys had been knocked unconscious by a magical blast which sent him into the wall. Both boys had been bloody and exhausted, and Harry realised that not one of the other students that had been present at the scene had offered to help either of the injured parties once the excitement was over, and Harry had even seen Orson watch from a distance before turning and walking away disinterested.

Harry had continued to watch as the victor dragged himself down the corridor, using both hands against the walls to balance himself as he

staggered away. Once he was gone Harry had stepped forward from the shadows in which he had been hiding and levitated the unconscious fighter to the medical wing, where he had left him on one of the beds, hoping that one of the staff would come along and help heal him shortly. Because of this, he could easily imagine what would happen if the other boys learnt of Sheridan and Horus. Whereas Harry found himself not particularly disturbed by their relationship, he knew from the muggle-world that there were many people against homosexuality. He imagined their response would be similar to Voldemort's aversion to half-bloods and smiled slightly, wondering if homophobic repulsion was also due to secret fears about who they really were.

"Hey, Pi!" Harry looked to his right to see Kat looking at him, a concerned look in her dark eyes and the sunlight glinting off her light hair. "You okay? You kinda phased out for a while."

Harry gave a short laugh. "I seem to be doing that a lot today." He said in way of an apology. "I should have been returning to Hogwarts today, to start my sixth year with my friends." He looked at the scenery around them as they walked. "I guess I'm missing them a little."

"A little?" Harry turned to see the slightly teasing glint in Kat's eyes.

"Okay, okay." He admitted. "A lot."

"You'll be fine." She said, nudging him enough to overbalance him and make his next step a little wobbly. "We'll give you plenty to do today to keep your mind off them."

"So, what are we doing today?" Harry asked. "Are we meeting anyone else?"

Kat shrugged. "We're nearly there." She said. "We'll just have to see who's turned up. I think most of the gang will be there." She said. "They seemed eager to meet you."

"Meet me?" Harry said, "They know I'm coming?"

Kat nodded. "We tend to ask each other before we invite someone new to the group. But they all seemed to know who you were."

"The scar?" Harry asked without emotion.

Kat nodded, glancing back over her shoulder at the other two boys who were walking a short distance behind. "I guess you'd never be able to get away from the identity it gives you," she said.

"Not unless it disappears." Harry said, resignedly. "And so far magic hasn't really helped with that."

Kat shook her head in sympathy. "It's a cruel world." She said. "Magic can do virtually anything, but the one thing you really want, it can't help you with."

"Muggles call it Sod's Law." Harry said and Kat grinned that easy smile of hers again before pointing up ahead.

"Just around the next bend." She said. "That's our usual meeting place." And before long they had rounded the corner to find a group of four other boys standing there.

"Hey," Kat greeted as they walked up. Harry nervously pulled at his sleeves as the boys scrutinised his appearance. "Guys, this is Pyro. Pi, this is Todd, Brandon, Brogan and Conway."

Harry nodded at each of them in turn and performed his own observations. Like Sheridan and Horus, the boys were all about his age, though their statures indicated that they had been at the school for a long time. Todd was the shortest of the group, and had red hair that would rival any of the Weasleys', though his was of a slightly darker shade. Brandon was also a couple of inches shorter than Harry, and his eyes stared out from his dark skin with a strange brightness that was akin to the shrewdness Harry often observed in Slytherins. Brogan, on the other hand, stood the tallest of the group, his broad shoulders seemingly twice as wide as Harry's, but he had an air of gentleness that reminded the Gryffindor of his half-giant friend, Hagrid, and that made him feel at ease. The last boy had

startling yellow eyes, and thick, brown hair that fell about his shoulders and a slight smile caressed his facial features. He stepped forward and held out his hand. "I believe I have you to thank for getting me to the hospital wing the other day." He said.

Harry froze as he placed his hand in his and recognised the bloodied and unconscious body he had levitated to safety.

"I – I'm sorry." He said, stammering a little. "I – I just thought that... that..."

Conway shook his head. "I really appreciated it, thanks," he said, dropping Harry's hand. "It's nice to know that you have someone to take care of you when things like that happen."

"If I can ask, what did happen?"

Conway nodded a greeting to Horus and Sheridan as they walked up to the group. "Just the usual friction that this school encourages." He said in a scything voice. "He wanted promotion. I wanted my life. I guess desperation wasn't enough; I just didn't have enough skill to win."

"Or luck." Horus said in his defence. "I heard Orson and his recount of the incident at dinner that night. You should have got Tocho towards the end, but Orson says that one of the students passed him another knife. He said that its appearance threw you off and allowed Tocho to get off the stunner that sent you into the wall."

"Did he see who it was that gave him that knife?"

Horus answered a negative and Conway just shook his head at the news. "But isn't that wrong?" Harry asked. "I mean, I know wizards nominate a second in their duels, but helping another when it's one on one?"

Brogan snorted. "Here they'll do anything to ensure victory, even cheat."

“Well, in a twisted way, isn’t that a sign of cooperation?” Harry asked. “If they are willing to support each other to win, doesn’t that imply that there might be other friendship groups like this one around?”

Todd shook his head. “If someone did hand over a knife, then it was probably due to some selfish motivation. Maybe it was someone who had to challenge Conway here on the next graduation day. Or someone he had defeated in a past fight. There is no trust here. It’s a lonely life.”

“But you guys have each other.” Harry pointed out.

Conway smiled wryly. “Welcome to the group of dissenters.” he said.

“Dissenters?” Harry asked.

“We’re a group of rule-breakers. Mavericks.” Brandon explained. If Harry had suspected a foreign accent to go with the darkness of his skin, he couldn’t have been more surprised at the broad northern lilt that escaped his lips. “We’ve gone against what the school strives to enforce, and made friends.”

Harry smiled. “And that is classed as rule breaking?” he asked in disbelief.

“You really need to ask that question?” Sheridan said with a laugh. “You’ve seen what goes on here.”

“Then why don’t any of you leave?” he asked, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

The group looked at each other, as if none of them really knew how to reply. Eventually Kat spoke up. “Well, I can’t.” she said. “Not until I become free of my father’s grasp when I come of age. As for the others, well, most boys come here because it has a better appeal than the life they came from. Most of them were abused, orphaned, lonely... This school seeks them out and gives them an opportunity to become something great. They can either stick on here, like Horus has done, to become a master and teach the new intakes. Or they

can leave, and are able to defend themselves and lead a life of their own where they can demand the respect they feel they deserve.”

Harry nodded as he thought about what Kat said. “It’s a school of up-and-coming Dark Lords then” he said, “After having a bad childhood you come here to have all your pent up frustrations turned into a weapon you can use against society. After a while, all you can think about is how others have done you wrong and in what way you can claim your revenge.”

Kat placed a sympathetic hand on his arm. “Only if people let it,” she said. “We may only be a small minority, but we haven’t. That’s why we arrange the first Sunday of every month to be our time. Leo was the one who suggested it. He told us it would remind us about what life is really about.”

Harry nodded. “So, what do you guys do for fun?”

“Well,” Sheridan started with a grin, somewhat relieved at the change of subject. “I have a lot of pent up energy, and I haven’t been for a good, hard run for a long time. Whose up for it?”

Brogan nodded. “We’ll head for the stream in that glen on the other side of the fields. We can spend the afternoon there and head back later this evening.”

The others seemed to be in agreement, but Harry seemed unsure. “A run?” he asked. “I’m not very fast, and can’t go very far...”

He frowned in confusion as the others started laughing. Sheridan threw his arm over Harry’s shoulder. “Do you really think we run all that way like this?” he asked. “Are you an animagus or aren’t you?”

“Yeah,” Brandon added. “We’ve heard a lot about you and your remarkable abilities. Though you don’t have to worry, we wouldn’t go round announcing about all your special talents to every person we see.”

Harry shifted nervously from one foot to another. He appreciated what Brandon had said about keeping his Phoenix form secret, but

was still slightly clueless as to what they were implying. Kat eventually took pity on him, and nodded to Horus. "You'll be riding with Sheridan, right?" she asked, and the boy nodded, "Right then, mount up." She said, and Sheridan transformed into a tall, dark Arab horse. With a bit of a jump, Horus jumped onto his saddle-less back and laughed as the animagus he was sitting on reared slightly, eager for the run to start.

Kat then turned to Brogan, "Who you taking?" she asked.

"I can take Brandon and Todd if they like." He said. "Though Todd might have to transform, he'll be lighter that way." Both boys mentioned nodded and within moments a tall, heavysset shire stood patiently as Brandon mounted him, and then placed the fox-form of Todd on the broad back in front of him.

Kat turned to Conway.

"You running?" she asked and the boy nodded, instantly transforming into a powerful looking wolf, who immediately started to worry the heels of Horus' mount, causing Sheridan to shy away and spin in excitable circles.

Kat turned to Harry. "And that just leaves you and me." She said with a smile. "I'll ride you, if that's okay?"

Harry visibly flinched, and sent the riders into peals of laughter, and the animagi to show their amusement by wagging their tails or pawing the ground. "Oh, it won't be that bad." Kat said, trying to ignore the blush on Harry's face. "To be honest, we've been looking for another big beastie for a while, it isn't quite the same when you have to share mounts."

If anything, Harry turned even redder, and was sure he resembled the colour of Ron's hair by now.

"I haven't tried to transform into a horse yet." He said, shyly.

"Just take a good look at Brogan, close your eyes and picture his form." Horus said. "I would suggest you examine Sheridan, but his

head is already big enough and he might get the wrong idea.” He ended with a laugh as his mount shot forward a few feet, flicking his head in amusement as Horus was nearly unseated.

Harry nervously looked at Kat, who nodded at him encouragingly. “Go on, Pi.” She said. “You’ll really enjoy it.”

Harry took a deep breath and shut his eyes. Of course he would enjoy it, it was over-enjoying it he was worried about. Within moments, however, a tall black stallion stood between the other horse animagi, a long white blaze in the jagged shape of a lightning bolt running down it’s face.

Kat smiled slightly and reached up to rub the animagi between the eyes. Harry lowered his head and pushed slightly against her shoulder so she could reach better, and felt his eyes droop closed at the gentle caresses. “Beautiful.” He heard Kat murmur gently, before a loud cough made him jerk his head up and prick his ears forward.

“C’mon, guys.” Horus was saying. “I don’t think Sheridan can contain himself any longer.”

The animagi in question neighed slightly, and flicked his head again and pranced impatiently. Harry gave an answering neigh, and turned his head to watch Kat nimbly pull herself up onto his back. With another cry, Sheridan reared up slightly, before pushing off powerfully with his hind legs, breaking straight into a gallop. Harry felt the ground shake as Brogan did the same, though without the same grace as the Arab.

Harry stood, his head highly poised and his face alert as he watched the two beasts run away from him, Conway racing happily in between them. “C’mon, Pi.” Kat encouraged, running her hands through his long, black mane. “You can’t let them get away from us that easily.”

Harry flicked his head once in understanding, and felt Kat wrap her hands firmly into his mane and grip him tightly with her knees before he tensed his hindquarters, and pushed away firmly, feeling the sudden sensation of freedom as he raced after his new friends.

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Harry sighed deeply as he rested in the shelter of a tall tree on the banks of a stream. The sound of the water falling over the rocks had made him drift into a deep retrospection, and he was reminded him of the time he had played with the hose pipe that fateful day when Voldemort had arrived at the Dursley's house.

"You're drifting again." Kat said quietly next to him. Harry opened his eyes and turned his face to see her lying on her back next to him, staring up at the blue sky through the branches of the tree above them. "Are you thinking of your friends?"

Harry stayed silent for a moment before answering. "They'll be worried about me." he said, but he couldn't hide the question in his voice.

"Of course they will be." Kat assured him. "You're their friend. And you're missing. What with you being top on the hit-list of a dark wizard, why wouldn't they be worried?"

Harry shrugged slightly and sat up, wrapping his arms around his knees. He watched Sheridan and Horus lying together under a similar tree a little further down the bank, and could hear the other four splashing around up-stream. "I was really angry last year." He said. "I had to go back to the Dursley's for my own protection, but I felt I was out of the loop. And, what with Voldemort planting visions in my head of Sirius..." his voice drifted away. "I just can't believe they stuck by me after all that, you know? I treated them so bad, and yet they were there, fighting next to me at the ministry. And they got hurt because of me. If I had only listened to Hermione, or used the mirror that Sirius had given me." He sniffed slightly, and picked up a stick, digging it into the ground next to where he was sitting. "And yet they are always there."

Kat smiled. "That's what friends do." She said. "You are a really likeably person, Pi, once you let people in far enough to get to know you."

Harry smiled at her, then his face dropped and he started digging at the earth again. "And then I go and disappear." He said. "What must they think of me now?"

Kat shrugged. "I'm sure they'll understand when they see you next." She said. "In a way, you are doing this for them, and don't forget that. They are the reason why you are so determined to stick it out here. Don't worry about what the rest of the wizarding world expects you to do. If they used any of their intelligence they would realise that they could defeat Voldemort easily if they would only fight together. Just you focus on what's close to you."

Harry's breath caught in his chest as he realised that Kat was now sitting shoulder to shoulder with him, her face barely inches from his own. He turned his head to look into her dark eyes, her blonde hair falling loosely about her shoulders, still slightly windswept from the run they had that morning. "On what's close to me." Harry repeated softly, before slowly leaning in to capture her lips.

"Hey, what are you guys up to?"

The sudden hail from the soggy foursome made Harry jerk away. He scooted across the ground a couple of inches and he felt his ears turn red.

"We're just talking." Kat said, and Harry stole a glance to see her looking at him wistfully.

"Whilst we were doing other things." Sheridan said with a grin, but pulled Horus up from the floor and they walked to the tree where Harry and Kat sat hand-in-hand.

"That's too much info." Brandon said, holding up one arm as if to ward off the mental images that had appeared in his head.

"What were you two talking about?" Conway asked, sitting down and flicking his long hair to get rid of the drips, causing Horus to punch him in the shoulder lightly for getting him wet.

“Team work.” Harry said quickly, thinking over what he and Kat had really been talking about before he had been distracted by her close proximity. “About how Voldemort could be beaten easily if people just got together and stood up against him.”

Brogan nodded. “But saying something like that is so much easier than trying to put it into practise.”

“All they really need is a focus, a leader to show them what to do, and what they can achieve when they do it.” Brandon added and the others nodded in agreement.

“Do you guys ever train together?” Harry asked after a short silence.

“What do you mean?” Conway prompted.

“Well, I mean, you’re all aware of how beneficial it is to work as a team. And you all get along so well, I was just wondering whether you guys ever train together. You know, learn how to fight with someone covering your back, play silly capture-the-flag games?”

Horus shook his head. “The curriculum at Marcello doesn’t really stand for anything like that.” He said. “I doubt any of the Master’s would want to teach it.”

“Leo might.” Kat said.

Horus shook his head. “He’d encourage extra study in the area, and possibly send you off in the right direction, but he’s too scared of the consequences to step out of line and directly instruct you.” He glanced to Kat as he spoke.

“Hey, you know you don’t have to tread carefully around me,” she said. “I know my father’s a bully, and is likely to lash out at Leo for any little thing. But it’s just because he knows Leo is good enough to beat him. He just doesn’t realise that it isn’t in Leo’s nature to want to.”

“Why don’t we start up our own group, then?” Harry suggested quietly. The others stared at him in silence until he worked up the courage to

speaking again. "I mean, I'd like to learn how to work in a team myself." He said. "I'm working hard on my own, and I can feel myself getting better, but I could also do with some external input. Maybe we could help each other train? And, maybe... maybe we could prat around a bit as well? It could be a bit of educational fun."

The boys snorted at Harry's last words, and Harry found himself grinning after he said them.

"You know, it's not really that bad of an idea." Todd said. "If we all help each other out, then we'd improve a lot."

"As if some of us need improvement," Sheridan said, nudging his partner with his shoulder. "Some of us just pick things up naturally."

"I've been doing this sort of thing all my life." Horus defended, then explained for Harry's benefit, "Before I came here, I lived with my father who was pretty good with a sword. But there is always room for improvement. There is often a lot you can learn from someone new, and I can always be a point of reference for you guys."

Kat nodded, "And whilst you're training during the day, I can go to the library and research some new moves or something." She said. "It gets boring with nothing to do, this would give me some motivation to get out of bed in the mornings. And I bet, if I ask him nicely, Leo will give me some advice as to what sort of things to look up."

Horus nodded. "It sounds as if we have ourselves a new study group," he said.

"Where and when should we meet?" Brandon asked.

"Sundays, like today." Conway immediately said. "No one will notice us disappear on a Sunday, most people work independently then."

"And weekly." Todd added. "It'll give us each something to look forward to at the weekend."

"And I don't see any reason why we can't work around here." Brandon said. "It's far enough away that the others won't stumble

onto what we are doing, and there's plenty of room in the fields we've crossed to do more energetic practise. Great idea, Pi!"

"So it's sorted, then?" Brogan asked and the rest of them nodded excitedly. "In which case," he said, standing up. "We'd better head back. It's getting late and we can't miss dinner."

Brandon and Conway laughed as they stood up with him. Harry jumped to his feet and held out his hand to help Kat up. She smiled at him, and held him back as the others walked through the trees. "We should do this again sometime." She said, once the others were far enough in front to not be in earshot.

"We'll be doing this every Sunday from now on." Harry said, frowning slightly.

"Not that." Kat said with a smile and a laugh. She tugged on Harry's arm to make him stop and turned him to face her. "This." She stepped forward and gently pressed her lips to Harry's own.

In the briefest of moments, Harry's world stopped spinning. That was until Kat stepped away and smiled at him, taking his hand and pulling him after the others. Harry grinned widely, turning into his horse form as soon as the trees thinned out enough and let out a loud neigh as Kat climbed onto his back. Soon he was running carefree alongside his new friends, momentarily forgetting his problems and thinking that life could not get much better.

Chapter 28: The DA

Hermione flipped another page of the defence book Professor Lupin had given her earlier that day, grazing her eyes over spells and their purposes and placing a torn piece of parchment in the pages she felt could be taught to the DA in the following weeks.

She was sat on one of the arms of the sofa in front of the Gryffindor common room's fire and sighed, glancing at her watch before tearing off another slip of parchment and marking the page of a jinx that would give the unfortunate victim the impression that everything they saw was reversed, like a reflection in a mirror. Shortly after, she heard the familiar stomp of Ron's footsteps as he ran down the stairs from the boy's dormitories, his fringe still wet from the shower he had just had after Quidditch practise.

"Thanks for waiting, Hermione." He said, slightly breathless, as he headed straight past her for the portrait door.

Hermione smiled at him, and shook her head in mock exasperation. "Don't you think you are taking on just a little bit too much?" she asked as they hurried down the corridor towards the Room of Requirement. "I mean, running the DA? Quidditch captain? Not to mention all the work we have been given for the NEWTs...? Do you think you're going to be able to cope with all this?"

Ron looked at her, disappointment clear in his face. "Do you think I can't cope?" he asked.

"No!" Hermione exclaimed. "Of course not... its just... well, Ron, it's barely the end of the second week, and already you're rushing around in a panic..."

"You didn't seem to have a problem when you took on all those extra courses in our third year." He puffed as they climbed some stairs.

"That's because I had that time turner to help me." She said. "And it's not something I'm going to even think about doing again anytime soon. I was exhausted!"

"Well, I have you to help me with the DA." He said, and then sent an unsure glance her way. "You will help me, won't you?"

"Of course, Ron..."

"And Ginny has already been a big help with the Quidditch team." He continued quickly, his talking speed matching the pace of his long legs along the corridor. "She's helped make some plans for the practises, and we're holding try-outs for more chasers tomorrow..."

"Ron! Stop!" Hermione pulled herself to her halt in the corridor, and took hold of his arm, forcing the tall red-head to stop also. "Why are you doing this?"

"Doing what?"

"Pushing yourself like this." Hermione said, concern showing in her voice. "What are you trying to prove?"

Ron stared down at her blankly for a few minutes, before a frown creased his face and he shook his head at her in disappointment. "You don't believe I can cope."

Hermione shook her head, but couldn't help thinking that Ron was right. She ran a hand up over her face and started rubbing her eyes. With a start she realised that it was a movement she had seen Harry do many times before when he was tired, and also Dumbledore at the meetings during the summer. She looked up at Ron who was staring at his feet, his bottom jaw jutting out slightly, and sighed. She could see that he had changed a lot over the summer. After going to the Order meetings and learning what a war against Voldemort entailed, he had become more serious and thoughtful. And Harry's disappearance had hit him hard, making him realise how easy it was to lose someone he was close to. Hermione was sure one of his reasons for taking on so much extra work was not only to create his own identity, but also to prove that he was no longer the youngest brother, but a young man who could and would do anything to help those he loved.

He had grown another couple of inches over the summer as well, but now carried his weight differently. No longer the lanky and slightly clumsy teenager he had been, he was now stood up tall and determined, almost proudly, Hermione mused. And now possessed an inner Gryffindor strength that could be compared to that of Harry's.

She stepped a little closer to him and he looked up, wide-eyed and startled at how close she was. "You know something?" Hermione asked, her voice barely audible. "You've changed. A lot. And you're right. You can cope with all this." She gave a small laugh. "Especially with Ginny and me here to help." She stood up on her toes slightly and lightly kissed the corner of his mouth. "C'mon." she said slightly louder. "Lets get to the meeting. They'll begin to wonder where you've got to."

She led the way into the Room of Requirement, leading a slightly dazed Weasley by his hand as the students in the greatly enlarged room looked up at them as they entered. Ginny and Neville walked towards them, Ginny raising an inquisitive eyebrow at their linked hands before Ron came to his senses and quickly pulled his hand away, turning slightly pink around the ears.

"What have we got planned for tonight?" Neville asked. He had also changed a lot since the incident in the Department of Mysteries, and had been more than enthusiastic about offering his help with the running of the DA, if only to improve his own skills.

He, Hermione and Ginny all looked towards Ron, who pulled a crumpled piece of paper out of his robes. He threw a small apologetic glance towards Hermione, who smiled at the condition of his lesson plans, and quickly scanned the notes he had jotted down. "I think we are going to go over the things that Harry had taught us last year again." He said. "Some of the fifth years were still having problems with the easier blocking spells, and it couldn't hurt to have more practise with the Patronus." The corner of his mouth lifted slightly. "Even I could do with a bit of work on that one."

Hermione smiled. "Maybe we should announce that to the rest of them." She said, indicating the forty or so students that were sitting around the room talking.

Ron nodded, and took a deep breath, before making his way to the front of the room, his friends following closely behind him. He reached around his neck for the whistle that the room had provided for him and gave a short but quiet blast on it. Almost immediately, every pair of eyes in the room turned to him and Ron steeled himself to talk to them.

“Hi again,” he said. “Today we’re going to work on the same sort of things that we did last week, just to make sure it’s all sunk in. If you’re okay with it, then move around the room and help those who aren’t. Next week Hermione and I have planned a few relatively easy curses that might prove useful in a duel...” he hesitated slightly and looked desperately to Hermione at his side for further explanations.

She smiled encouragingly at him and stepped forward. “But we’ll explain about those in more detail next week. If all those who want to practise disarming go with Neville and Ginny over to the far end of the room, those wanting to practise shields can go in the middle, I’m sure there will be enough of you there to remember how to do it, if not come find me. And Ron and I’ll head over there to work on the Patronus charm.” She pointed to the opposite corner of the room. “Are there any questions?”

Almost immediately one of the male Slytherins, Alex Turnball, stepped forward, causing the attention of the room to turn to him. “Did any of you read the Daily Prophet this morning?” he asked.

Ron glanced at Hermione who nodded sadly. There had been an article in it about Harry and his absence from school and they had anticipated that the DA would eventually ask them about it. The reporter had expressed his concern that the loss of the boy-who-lived could symbolise the loss of all hope for the wizarding world. The Gryffindor table had been outraged at the story, and had been telling anyone who would listen that placing the fates of the wizarding world on Harry’s shoulders was wrong and unfair. Hermione and Ron had just sat silent in the middle of the table, sharing occasional looks that communicated one thing – the prophecy.

Hermione sighed and was about to step forward to try and explain the situation without giving too much away before Neville beat her to it, startling most of the room with his sudden bout of courage. "I've seen Harry fight..." He started strongly but his voice died away as if he had suddenly become aware of what he was doing. Hermione watched as he visibly pulled back his shoulders and started again.

"I've seen Harry fight, maybe not against You-Know-Who, but it was against Death Eaters. He's not any different from any of us. He hasn't got any special powers..." Ron shot a quick glance at Hermione, who refused to meet his gaze. "... nor is he capable of any spells that we can't all learn and perform here. It's unfair to send him to face V-V-Vol..." he took a deep breath and calmed himself down. "Voldemort by himself..." Ron watched as a look of pride crossed Hermione's face at Neville's achievement, and even Ron had a sense of respect for the habitually timid Gryffindor. "... and expect him to win. Not without our help." He said.

He took another deep breath. "He can't do it alone." He said. "He may be a symbol of hope for us wizards, but we can't depend on him. He's only human, and..."

His voice died away as he ran out of things to say.

"I think what Neville is trying to say..." a dreamy voice from the back of the room said, and everyone turned to see Luna sitting there, her hands placed on her knees and a strange pink and yellow scarf tied around her neck. "... is that Harry will need support when Voldemort comes along. And it's up to us to make the rest of the wizarding world realise that."

"Up to us?" a seventh year Hufflepuff prefect asked, frowning. "What can we be expected to do to help?"

"Well, we all agree that Harry shouldn't be the scapegoat in all this." Ginny said. "I vote that we ought to write a letter to the Prophet, tell them what we think, as his friends. Make them realise that Harry is only a boy, one of us..."

Ron and Hermione looked at each other morosely as the room suddenly exploded in a cacophony of sound as people discussed ideas between themselves, each one wanting to be heard above their neighbour.

"What are we going to do?" Hermione asked, leaning closer to Ron and whispering in his ear. Ron's shoulder shivered slightly as her hair tickled the side of his neck.

He shook his head. "I don't see any harm in letting them do this." He said. "I think Harry would appreciate the truth to be printed. You know how much he hates publicity..."

"But in a way the truth has already been printed." Hermione said. "He is the saviour of the wizarding world... well, might be..."

Ron laughed slightly, though he was very much aware of what that "might be" could mean. "It's all such a mess." He said. "I'm actually quite glad he isn't here to see any of this."

Hermione nodded in agreement, before nudging Ron with her elbow. "We'd better stop this." She said, indicating the arguments that were being flung across the room. "Else we'll never get anything done tonight."

Ron brought the whistle back up to his lips and blew it once more. It took longer to get people settled this time, but eventually the room was quiet enough for his voice to be heard. "I think telling people about the Harry we know is a great idea." He said, and a number of people shot smirks at their neighbours. "But I don't think we need to make so much of a big deal over it," he blew the whistle again as the room disagreed with him loudly. "I don't think Harry would appreciate it" he explained. "He hates publicity as it is, and the less he's in the papers the happier he is." The room stayed silent this time.

"We propose that only a couple of us send in letters to the Prophet." Hermione said. "And that maybe Luna's dad will allow a small article to be put in the Quibbler...?" Luna nodded enthusiastically.

“Meanwhile...” Hermione continued. “I think we should get on with tonight’s practise. We only have another hour before curfew. So make the most of it.”

Almost immediately the room stood up and moved to the respective areas of the room. Ron walked beside Hermione as they moved to the corner where she had allocated the Patronus practise. “You think that the rest of the year is going to be like this?” he asked.

Hermione shook her head. “I hope not,” she said. “I could do with a quiet year to prepare for the Newts.”

“Isn’t that tempting fate?” Ron asked. “I mean, things have hardly been normal so far. Not with Harry going missing. Things can only get worse, right?”

“Or they could get better.” Hermione contradicted optimistically. “Harry could be turn up tomorrow at breakfast, safe and sound with an excuse that he just had to get away to think things through. And Voldemort will kill himself off by eating a poisoned apple or something, and everyone will live happily ever after.” She examined her wand and sniffed slightly. “It’s not going to happen, is it?” she said in a broken voice.

Ron laughed and put his arm around her shoulders. “It’s doubtful, but we could always hope.” He said, and pulled his own wand out. He shut his eyes and sifted through his memories, trying to find one that would be happy enough to produce a Patronus. A small smile crossed his face as he remembered the quick kiss Hermione had given him in the corridor before, and cried “EXPECTO PATRONUM”. He heard Hermione’s squeal of delight and opened his eyes to see a bright silver cloud in front of him.

“Well done, Ron,” she said. “It almost had a corporeal form that time! What memory did you use?”

Ron smiled at her enthusiasm and just shrugged slightly, raising his wand again to give the charm another go.

Chapter 29: Dance of death

"Where has he got to?" Brogan asked, crossing his arms and looking out over the field in front of him. "He's never been late before."

"Was he at breakfast this morning?" Horus asked, "I didn't think to look."

Conway shook his head. "I didn't see him in his usual spot" he said. "But I did notice that Tocho and his lackeys were hanging around outside the main hall. Do you think he could've got himself into a fight?"

Kat swore slightly from behind them. "I forgot that my father took that belt from him yesterday. It's going to be a free for all now."

Sheridan grinned slightly. "Do I detect a note of concern?" he teased slightly.

Kat sent him a withering look. "I'm just worried about him, is all." She said. "He's one of us now. We ought to look out for him."

Sheridan laughed. "And I'm sure that has nothing to do with the fact that you have cancelled our meet next weekend so that you can both go on a romantic picnic for two now, would it?"

Kat blushed slightly. "There's just something about him, okay?" she defended. "I don't know what it is. But he's just... different." She finished lamely.

Todd snorted from where he was laid out on the grass behind them, flicking through a book he had borrowed from the library. "I'd say. It's not everyday that you come across someone who's been up against a dark wizard and come out alive and coherent."

"No, that's not it." Kat insisted. "There's something else about him. Makes him stand out from the rest of the guys here."

Sheridan lifted a hand and started to dramatically scratch his forehead. "I wonder what that could be..." he mused, then ducked as Kat lashed out at him and the others laughed.

"You lot are hopeless." She said.

Horus just smiled at her. "Well, I hope it all works out well for you." he said sincerely. "He seems like a good chap to me. I approve."

"Do you now?" Sheridan asked, but before Horus could reply a raven flew in between them, transforming into the familiar form of their friend Brandon before he landed lightly on the ground.

"Its okay." He said. "Pi's on his way." And it wasn't long before the group could see a large black stallion galloping hard and fast towards them.

Before he reached them, Harry transformed back into himself, panting slightly as he hurried the last few yards. "I'm sorry." He gasped, dropping his bag and a large curved blade onto the floor in front of him. "I didn't mean to be so late."

"You alright?" Kat asked concernedly. "You look really tired."

"So would you be if you'd just galloped flat out all that way." Sheridan said, then turned to Harry. "Did you not think to apparate?"

Harry opened and closed his mouth a few times, but couldn't think up a decent reply. Instead, he puffed out some of the stale air from his lungs and started to explain. "I didn't sleep too well last night." He said. "So I went out early to get some training in. But I sort of lost track of time..."

"That riveting, was it?" Todd asked as Brandon pulled him up from the floor.

Harry shrugged. "I just get lost in the moves sometimes, you know? Its like they take over..." he froze as the other seven in his group turned to him, startled expressions on their faces. "What did I say?" he asked.

Horus stepped forward. "You trying to tell us that when you practise on your own, the moves just happen? Like they are second nature or something?"

Harry nodded hesitantly and Horus started to laugh. "But it's only started happening recently." Harry said, trying to work out what he had done that had amused the Master so much. "I mean, I just thought it was because I was getting more used to it..."

"Is there anything you can't do?" Horus asked.

Harry shook his head. "I don't understand..."

"Wielding a sword like you described is not just because you are 'getting used to it'." Conway explained. "It's something that all the students here, and all wizarding swordsmen everywhere, hope to achieve someday."

Harry looked at him blankly. "I still don't...."

"It's called the Dance of Death, Pyro." Kat said quietly. "It's the sign of a Master."

"Dance of Death?" Harry screwed up his face. "That sounds awful..."

"Well, it's not." Horus said. "Not really. It's a routine that takes over your moves, something that you crave to practise and perfect every time you pick up a sword. Most wizards think that it prepares you for a fight, one of great importance. And if you listen to what it tells you and perfect it, then you are likely to win that fight."

Harry snorted. "I don't really see Voldemort resorting to any muggle methods to fight me." he said, thinking of the duel that was expected of him. He and Kat had explained to the others the week before about the prophecy and how he had come to be at the school. "He detests anything that isn't saturated in some sort of magic."

“Which gives you an immediate advantage over him.” Brogan pointed out. “If you get close enough to combat him in this way then what can he do to stop you?”

Harry thought for a few moments, then shook his head. “No.” he said. “If what you say about this Dance thing is true, then I doubt it’s going to be against him.” He winced as memories of Avery’s knives resting up against the bare skin of his torso flashed through his mind. “There are other wizards in his circle who are better acquainted with the sword.”

Sheridan grinned again and started rubbing his hands together. “Boy, how I wish I could be around to see this fight.”

Harry ignored him and turned to Horus. “Do you have a Dance?” he asked.

Horus shook his head. “I did have, but I used it against one of the other Masters who left shortly before you arrived here. It promoted me to the position of Master. In terms of experience, I probably wasn’t much more advanced than any of the rest of the boys here, but Leo saw me practising on my own once, and explained things to me. I worked hard at it, and eventually the Dance became second nature and I was promoted.”

“You think you could let us see yours?” Kat asked Harry.

The boy immediately shook his head, his eyes wide. “Oh no,” he said. “Its not that great, I mean, it only started happening recently....”

“Oh c’mon, Pi,” the others started encouraging him, and Conway even went as far as to pick up Harry’s blade and pass it to him.

Horus nodded at him encouragingly. “Now you know what it is,” he said. “Just give in to the moves, don’t fight them. Feel the moves flowing through your body...it will control you.”

Harry frowned at the long piece of metal in his hand, not liking the idea that he wasn’t in control of his actions, then nodded reluctantly.

"Its really not that amazing." He muttered as the others moved away to a respectful distance and Harry raised the blade in front of him.

After a brief pause where he collected himself, Harry started swinging the blade in a large figure of eight through the air in front of him. The moves were large, exaggerated and slow; moves that were easily explained by the novice that he was. After a couple of repetitions, however, Harry picked up the pace. He sank into the feeling of calmness that he had first experienced earlier that week, and let the sword control his movements. Soon he was stepping forward and to the side, leaning forward into lunges and sidestepping the shadow attacks from an imaginary foe. He became oblivious to everything apart from the flashes of silver from his blade as it caught the sunlight and reflected it back into his eyes.

Still the moves became faster and smoother, until Harry felt himself to be as light as the air, skipping over the ground as if he was born to move in such a way. His routine was rudely interrupted in the same way as it had earlier that morning. In one move, the blade swung sharply up into the air above Harry's head, and his back bent back unnaturally far, causing him to over balance and fall to the floor hard.

He lay there, staring up at the sky as he tried to re-orientate himself, before he sat up, giving a small laugh of embarrassment and panting slightly. He pulled himself to his feet, rubbing the muscles in the small of his back that he had strained in his final move. "As you can see." He said. "Not that great..."

The others shook their heads at him.

"That was amazing, Pyro..."

"...Are you sure you haven't used a blade before? Maybe in another life...?"

"...What was that move you tried to do at the end?"

Harry's eyes connected with Kat's, who had a small smile on her face. "I think I know just what we should practise today." She said, and the others turned to her questioningly. Without any warning, she bent

over backwards, placed her hands on the floor and kicked her legs up, performing a perfect flip.

The other boys just stared at her. “What was that?” Sheridan asked incredulously.

Kat nodded to Harry. “What was your last move, Pi?” she pointed out, and Harry’s eyes widened in realisation. He lifted his sword up into the air, until it was pointed up to the sky, and the others could see how his back was starting to bend in a similar way to how Kat’s had as she placed her hands on the floor.

“Oh no.” Brogan said whose heavy-set stature would clearly struggle with such manoeuvres. “You are not going to get me to do that.”

Kat smiled sweetly at him. “Maybe not just that. But I don’t see how some coordination skills could do anyone any harm. The more flexible of the group can do some gymnastics with me, whilst the others can work on balance and posture.”

Todd and Conway started laughing as Sheridan started taking up a number of poses as if there was someone standing in front of him with a camera. But Horus had a thoughtful frown on his face. “Wait up, guys.” He said. “I think she’s got something. My dad used to get me doing all these rolls and things when I was little. And other masters tend to get their students to practise balance and posture when duelling. I don’t see how it can hurt.”

The boys stared at him as if he was a traitor to the team, but Harry nodded. “I’m willing to give it a go.” He said, sending a shy smile to Kat.

“Of course you would...” Sheridan started to mutter before Brandon elbowed him in the side.

“C’mon guys.” Kat pleaded, batting her eyelashes at the four boys. “You might even enjoy it a little.”

"I doubt it." Brogan breathed but Todd sighed and shook his head in defeat.

"Okay, okay." He said and Kat gave him a grin and a quick hug. "We'll give it a try."

Chapter 30: The picnic.

The next week found Harry sitting on top of the fence post at their usual meeting place, concentrating on a piece of parchment resting on his knee. He looked up when he heard someone approach, and smiled as Kat walked around the corner dressed casually in a light flowing trousers and a jumper. She was leaning far to one side and staggering down the path, carrying a heavily laden picnic basket.

Harry lightly pushed himself off the fence and bent to tuck the letter he had been writing to his friends into his bag.

"I feel really guilty about this, you know." He said, throwing his bag over his shoulder and reaching out to relieve Kat of her heavy burden.

"Oh? How so?" Kat asked, taking his free arm in hers and guiding him further down the path.

"Well, you've picked the spot, supplied all the food... I feel as if I should've made more of an effort."

Kat laughed lightly, a sound that filled Harry's chest with warmth. "Don't be silly. It's not like I have anything better to do to occupy my time."

"Oh, cheers." Harry said, feigning hurt and pulling his arm away from hers.

Kat laughed louder. "You know what I mean." She said. "If it wasn't for all the practise sessions that were your idea, there wouldn't be anything for me to do around here at all. Not unless Leo or Horus were free to duel with me anyway. And I honestly can't think of anything more enjoyable than preparing a light lunch and going for a walk on a nice, sunny day like today, in the excellent company of a fine young man such as yourself."

Harry felt his cheeks colour slightly at her words, but kept up the teasing atmosphere by saying. "Light lunch? It seems to me as if you've packed enough for all of Marcello's "fine young men"!"

"There's a big flask of pumpkin juice in there." Kat explained. "That's why it's so heavy. Do you want a hand with it?"

Harry hefted the weight a little bit. "It's not that heavy" he said, and smiled when Kat raised her eyebrow at him. "Well, nothing that a silent lightening spell couldn't cope with anyhow." He added and Kat smiled at him and turned to look at the beautiful countryside as they walked along.

Harry hefted the weight of the picnic hamper again, and smiled to himself. With all the private training he was doing and now with the extra duelling time he had with Horus, Sheridan and the others, the weight of the hamper no longer bothered him that much. His shoulders had filled out thanks to the hours of swinging a blade in practise routines and the pull-ups he had been performing on a smooth branch in the glade by the lake. He knew he would never be as broad-chested as Sirius had been, but at least his physique was now up to the vigorous training programme that Horus had given him on discovery of his Dance.

"So, where are we headed?" he asked after a few minutes of silent companionship.

"I thought we could head a little up stream from where we meet every Sunday." Kat replied. "There are some really nice spots up there for a picnic. My mother used to take me when I was little."

Harry thought for a few moments about taking Kat to the lake where he practised. The scenery there was stunning, and he knew it would make the perfect picnic spot. But something made him refrain from telling her about it. He bit his lip slightly and supposed he was being selfish. He had come to think of that spot as his own, and was reluctant to take anyone else there in case it became spoilt.

"How did she die?" Harry said, changing the subject without really thinking of what he was saying. He was used to how everyone knew about his life and how his parents died, and he nearly kicked himself when he heard himself speak those words out loud. How callous could he be?

"You don't have to tell me if you don't want to." He added quickly, trying to amend his mistake. "I was just wondering is all."

Kat stayed silent for several more yards as they walked along, and Harry was about to apologise for asking such a personal question when she spoke up.

"She died when I was about five years old." She said. "Her death was one of the reasons why we no longer have girls at this school. She was just one of the couple of girls that were accepted here, and was in the same intake as my father. She became a Master soon after I was born, and was duelling with one of the other boys when she tripped and fell upon her own blade. Since then, most of the Masters who teach here at Marcello feel that women were not supposed to fight in this way. They aren't so sexist as to suggest that women shouldn't fight at all, they just think that their studies should concentrate on spells and magic, things that can be learnt elsewhere."

"Do you really believe that?" Harry asked. "That girls should be prevented from learning physical fighting techniques?"

Kat shook her head. "I do all right, don't I?" she asked. "It was only one incident, and it happened a long time ago. Leo told me once that he sure a tripping jinx had been thrown at her, and that it was purely a mistake that she cut herself as she fell. It could've happened to anyone, but the rules against having girls at the school were still passed."

"But you're still here?"

Kat nodded, the autumn sunlight causing her blonde hair to shimmer brightly. "I've never left." She confirmed. "For a long time my father just ignored me, and Leo was the one that brought me up, making sure that I became the person I wanted to be and that I was aware of a life outside Marcello, even if I could never leave. Once my father found out that Leo had been giving me duelling lessons, however..." she sighed. "I guess it isn't really my father's fault. He cared for my mother, and was once a great father. I loved him very much. But her

death hit him hard and he changed. When I was little he had wanted me to fight, to be the best and become the son that he had always wanted... I guess he got scared when he saw me with a training blade. He refused to let me do anything and began to hate everyone. He constantly reminded me that I was a girl and shouldn't learn what the others learnt. Leo managed to convince him otherwise. He saw how much I enjoyed sword fighting, and learning other skills such as archery and riding. He managed to get my father to see how beneficial it would be for me to be able to defend myself in a school of hormonal teenage boys. But my father still refused to acknowledge me. I sometimes like to kid myself and think that he really cares and pushes me away because he is scared that I might get hurt. But it's more likely that he has forgotten how to love. He's more concerned with controlling my life rather than letting me live it how I would like."

Harry stayed silent for a few moments. "I'm sorry." He said and Kat smiled at him.

"Don't be, it was a long time ago. You get used to it."

"But the emptiness never goes away." Harry replied. "I've lost count how many times I've wished that my mother would be there for me, or for my dad to tell me how proud he is. It isn't the same when others do it on their behalf. In my first year at Hogwarts, I came across a mirror that would show you your heart's deepest desire. Mine was my parents, and since I saw their faces in that mirror I've always longed to be with them. To meet them for just a while to tell them how much I miss them."

Kat smiled and reached for his hand. "They know." She assured him. "And I'm sure they wish they were here for you as well. At least you wouldn't be stuck in this place."

She raised her hand and indicated the spot by the stream she had been leading them too. A tall weeping willow fell over the deep banks of the trickling water, and a blackbird sung from somewhere within its branches, his heart not caring if anyone heard, but singing simply because he wanted to celebrate a new day.

Harry smiled slightly at the beauty of the sight. When he was younger he might have dismissed the subtle beauty of such a place, but now he had grown older, and wiser, he had come to realise that magic, not the sort that conjured furniture or transfigured needles into matches, but the sort that filled your body with a sense of wonder, was present wherever you wanted to find it.

"Maybe it was for the best." He said, the smile sounding in his voice.

Kat turned to him, looking at him questioningly.

"If my mother hadn't died that night, she wouldn't have protected me with her love and I would've been killed as well." Harry explained. "My life hasn't been the best since then, but I realise now that I can't let that stop me from living each moment as it comes." He bit his bottom lip and looked away as the words of the prophecy echoed through his head. "I don't know how many more of those moments I might have left."

Kat opened her mouth to speak, but Harry stopped her. "If Voldemort had not come to Privet Drive that night, and if I had never accidentally apparated myself here, I would never have met you." he continued. "and, if I do concentrate on living each moment as it comes, I can't think of a better moment than this." He indicated the stream, the willow and the grassy bank and held out a hand, conjuring a blanket that lay in the shade of the willow tree. "Would you like to join me?" he asked softly, and Kat smiled.

"Of course." She said, and settled herself down on the chequered blanket, taking the hamper as Harry passed it to her. She spent a few moments pulling out plates of sandwiches and some fruit before saying, with her face still hidden by her long hair, "And, just to let you know. I can't think of a better moment than this either."

She looked up and her dark brown eyes met Harry's emerald gaze. They both blushed slightly and looked away, before settling down to a comfortable meal in the autumn sunshine.

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It was late afternoon, and Harry was lying on his side, watching Kat as she slept on the blanket beside him. They had spent the afternoon talking, with easy laughter and learning about each other's lives. Kat had told him that about her sixteen-year existence at Marcello, and Harry had told her more about his first few years at Hogwarts, about his parents and Sirius, and had been startled to realise how little he actually knew about them.

Kat had fallen asleep about an hour before, after they had both laughed hard at Harry's attempts to perform the flip Kat had taught the week previous. He could perform the flip fine, but was still having problems getting his feet under him for the landing, usually resulting in him landing in a pile, face-first, on the floor. And he couldn't even imagine how he was supposed to perform the flip with a sword in his hand.

He looked down at the parchment he had laid on the blanket in front of him and sighed. He had started the letter for Ron and Hermione that morning, but was finding it hard to know what to put. He had thought about mentioning Kat and his new friends, but he wanted to make sure that his friends back at Hogwarts realised that, no matter how much he was enjoying his time at Marcello, he still missed them and wanted to return home.

"You really do miss them, don't you?" a sleepy voice from beside his stated.

Harry looked down to see Kat's eyes open, and he realised she had been reading the letter upside down. The boy shook his head. "I can just imagine what they are feeling right now, is all." He said. "And I hate myself for staying away for so long."

"Why don't you tell them where you are?" she asked. "It's not like anyone could find their way here, not without the guidance of someone who had once been a student."

Harry smirked. "I'm sure they'd find a way." He said. "You don't realise how diligent Hermione is when she has something to work on. She's worse than a terrier when you give her something to research."

“So why don’t you want them to find out where you are?”

Harry shrugged. “This is just something I feel I have to do.” He said. “As far as I know, they don’t know the prophecy, and I don’t think they’d understand the reasons behind why I’m here. Ron would jump at the chance to learn how to use a sword, and Hermione would go mental over that library...” He shook his head at the sky and sighed. “...but they just wouldn’t understand why. And they wouldn’t understand that this is something I have to do by myself. In the end it’s going to be just him and me, and I don’t want to see them getting hurt by trying to get in the way. By staying here, I can train without having Voldemort breathing down my neck. And by having them in Hogwarts, they are protected by Dumbledore. At least until I can learn enough to return and finish this.”

Kat nodded understandingly and pushed herself up onto her elbow. “Hogwarts sounds like a great place.” She said. “Would you take me there sometime?”

Harry looked at her. “You want to come back to Hogwarts? With me?”

Kat nodded. “It sounds great.” She said. “I’d love to meet those ghosts you told me about, and your friends... even that pompous Malfoy guy you keep fighting with.” She laughed. “I bet you could teach him a few lessons now. And I’d love it if you could show me sometime?”

Harry smiled widely. “Of course.” he said. “I’d be happy to show you around. And I’m sure Ron and Hermione would love to meet you; Hermione would probably insist upon giving you the guided tour, complete with full Hogwarts history.” He stared off into space and scratched his chin slightly. “It might take you a couple of days...”

Kat laughed. “I think I would really enjoy it.” she said before her smile faded and she looked at the stream. “I’d do anything to get away from here.” She said sadly.

Harry sensed the change in mood and placed his hand on her arm. “I promise I’ll take you back with me when I go.” He said. “You’d be safe at Hogwarts, and I’m sure Dumbledore would be happy about letting

you stay with us in the sixth year dorms. Your father won't be able to get you there."

Kat's eyes sparkled brightly as they filled with tears. "Thank you." she said, and moved closer to him, pushing him over onto his back so she could rest her head against his shoulder.

Harry froze at her actions, then cautiously put his arm around her shoulder. When she didn't say anything he relaxed a little, and stared up at the blue sky above them.

"Why don't you go back?" Kat asked quietly after a moment of easy silence.

Harry looked down at her. "I'm sorry?" he asked.

Kat turned her head and looked up at him, their faces almost touching. "You miss them so much, so why don't you go and hand deliver the letter? You'll be able to see them, and may be happier once you know that they are safe and okay."

"And how am I supposed to get there?" he asked in a defeated tone. "I don't even know which direction Hogwarts is from here, let alone how to find my way back to Marcello."

Kat sat herself up. "I thought you had been doing all that research on how Phoenix's deliver their letters, and how they travel from place to place?"

Harry nodded. "Well, I have my theories. But I haven't actually done anything like that..."

"You sent those letters before." Kat pointed out.

"Yeah, well..."

"Surely it can't be that much different from that?"

“Well, I don’t think so.” Harry said. “I think it all revolves around the song.” He explained, then looked doubtful. “Though I’m pretty sure that the blood has something to do with it as well.”

He looked up at Kat who nodded encouragingly, and Harry sat up and launched into an enthusiastic description of his theories, waving his hands to explain things. “Imagine that magic is real.” He said. “Well, I know it’s real, but what I really mean is that it is something physical. And it’s part of you, like your blood. When a phoenix sings it charges up that magic, and directs it to do whatever it wants. Much like a wizard’s wandless magic I suppose, but on a much more powerful scale. A phoenix can not only apparate and carry large weights with its song, but can also do really amazing things, like trigger the magic in another creatures, and cause itself to burn and live again...”

Kat’s eyes sparkled at his enthusiasm, but she shook his head at his last comment. “We all know Phoenix’s can be reborn, Pi.” She said. “Its common knowledge.”

Harry clenched his fist in frustration. He could see what Kat meant, but couldn’t think of a way to explain to her what a remarkable achievement this was for any magical creature. “Okay,” he said in a calmer voice, turning to her. “Think of it a different way. A phoenix is a remarkable creature, but no one knows anything about it. All they think they know is that its tears have amazing healing qualities, and it goes through a burning day every so often, right?” Kat nodded at him. “Well I think that’s wrong. The phoenix is the purest form of light magic. It can’t do anything dark. There isn’t anything written anywhere about a phoenix going against it’s master, or fighting with other creatures, except in defence of what is right. And I think this is because of its blood. Or, more specifically, because of this magic that runs through its blood. Imagine that you eventually get your hands on a vial of phoenix blood, and have a way to trigger its magic potential. Do you have any idea what it could do?” Kat shook her head, and Harry looked down at his hands, as if he was afraid to continue saying his theories out loud. “I reckon you do almost anything with it,” he said in a quiet but excited voice. “Short of bringing anyone back

from the dead, that is.” He said with a laugh. “The one thing that really jumps to mind is removing the darkness from something...”

He paused as Kat processed this information. “Voldemort?” she asked.

Harry shrugged. “I don’t know.” He admitted. “I mean the prophecy said I have some sort of power, and I don’t see any one else turning into a phoenix. But I think he’s beyond even phoenix magic. I was thinking more along the lines of removing curses from people. Like a werewolf for example. Or maybe even restoring the minds of people who have been under the cruciatus for a long time...” he broke off, and the image of Neville’s mother handing her son a Drooble’s Best Blowing Gum wrapper in the ward at St Mungo’s hospital passed through his mind.

“But, if a phoenix can do all this, and you said before that it seemed as if you were taking on the magical properties of a phoenix, then why can’t you just picture Hogwarts and apparate there, and apparate back when you’re done?”

Harry fell silent. He had just revealed all his theories about phoenix and Kat was still going on about getting back to Hogwarts to visit his friends. He sighed and looked away from her, feeling defeated that she didn’t feel anything for his discoveries.

“Pi?”

“Maybe because I’m too scared to try it.” Harry snapped at her, but immediately took a deep breath to calm himself down. He hadn’t felt like snapping at anyone for a long time, and briefly wondered whether he was getting the snappish vibes from Voldemort’s moods again. He looked at Kat’s face and felt guilty for making her look so sad. She had only been trying to help him feel better. “Or maybe I’m scared I wouldn’t want to return.” He added in a softer voice. “Maybe I’d lose the nerve to stick it out here. And I’d never come back to see you again.”

Kat's face softened into a smile. "You wouldn't do that." She said. "After all, you've promised me that you would take me to Hogwarts. And I don't think you are the sort to go back on your word."

Harry chuckled, glad that she didn't feel bad about the way he yelled at her.

"But that is still no excuse not to go and check up on them." Kat said again in a firmer voice. "I really think you ought to go. It's Halloween today, they'll be having some sort of celebration, won't they?"

Harry nodded. "They usually have a meal, and a bit of a party in the common room afterwards." He confirmed.

"Then you can go and watch from a distance without being noticed." Kat said. "That way, if you don't want to be seen, you don't have to be."

"You really think I should go?" Harry asked, his disappointment at her obvious lack of enthusiasm for his theories being replaced with hope that he could see his friends again.

Instead of responding Kat jumped to her feet and held out her hand to pull him up. She took him by the shoulders, stood him in front of her and took a step back. "Go." She said seriously. "I won't wait up, but I do expect you to be back in time for breakfast." Her face broke into a grin. "It will be good for you."

Harry grinned back and stepped forward to give her a quick hug. "Thank you." he muttered, then transformed into his phoenix form. He gave a short trill that made Kat shiver pleasantly, warmth spreading quickly through her body and making her muscles relax.

"Go." She repeated, and with a bright flash the phoenix disappeared.

Chapter 31: Halloween.

Ginny watched with a painful expression on her face as her brother filled his fork with a mixture of potatoes and pumpkin pie and bent his head down low to make sure none of it fell off before the cutlery made it to his mouth.

“How can you eat like that?” Ginny asked in revulsion. “It’s not going to take you any longer to chew it if you take mouthfuls half that size, and you might even taste some of it.”

Ron just grinned slightly, his cheeks bulging and shrugged at his younger sister.

Ginny shook her head at him. “Just be thankful that Hermione isn’t here to see you.” she said, a slight twinkle appearing in her eye as she noticed her brother had stopped chewing when she had mentioned the girl’s name. “Enough to turn anyone off for life, that is.”

Ron narrowed his eyes and glared at her, unable to retort back due to the mouthful he was still chewing his way through.

“Where is Hermione, anyway?” Neville asked. “I haven’t seen her all afternoon.”

“I think she went to do the library to find something to help with her arithmancy homework.” Dean said.

“But it’s Halloween,” Ron complained, his mouth finally freed as he swallowed his food.

Dean shrugged. “Professor Vector set some really hard equations earlier.” He explained.

Ron rolled his eyes. “I don’t know how you can deal with subjects like that.” He said. “All those numbers and things... don’t you ever get confused?”

Dean laughed. “All the time, mate.” He replied. “That’s why I sit next to Hermione.”

Ron shot him a hooded glare and Dean laughed again. "Oh, don't even go there, Ron." He said. He nodded to Ginny across the table from them. "You think I'm going to waste all that time and effort it took for me to convince you to let me go out with your sister so that I can chase Hermione?" He shook his head and flashed Ginny a bright smile. "I'm quite happy with what I've got, thanks."

"That's all well and fine, Dean." Seamus said. "But do you mind rubbing your shoes against someone else's leg, please? These trousers were clean on this morning!"

The others laughed as Dean looked sheepishly down at his meal, until Ginny reached over and took his hand, giving him a slight wink as Seamus started making gagging noises next to her.

"Hi guys." Ron turned to see Hermione standing behind him, her book bag still hanging from her shoulder. He pushed at Neville's shoulder to get him to move up the table, and made space for Hermione to sit down between them. "Did I miss anything?" she asked, pulling forward an empty plate and filling it with pie.

"Not really." Ginny replied. "Just Ron's usual eating habits." And laughed as Ron stuck the tip of his tongue out at her.

"Oh, really mature." Hermione said with a smile, and gave Ron's elbow a nudge with her own. "You'd never guess what I saw on my way to the hall." Ron shook his head cluelessly, and Hermione took a quick sip of pumpkin juice before continuing. "Professors Lupin and Snape."

"And what's so amazing about that?" Ginny asked.

"That Snape was actually helping Professor Lupin carry some boxes from the entrance hall to the Defence classroom..." She said, and when this she was met with blank stares she added. "Willingly!"

The others looked shocked at this revelation. "What's gotten into him recently?" Ron asked. "He hasn't had a go at any of the Gryffindors in the corridors for ages."

“What’s he like in potions?” Neville asked Hermione. She was the only student in Gryffindor to have achieved an Outstanding in potions and go on to take the subject at NEWT-level.

“Not half as bad as he was.” She admitted. “Though that might be due to the fact that he no longer has to deal with exploding cauldrons or pranks being played in his class.”

“You are in a classroom full of Slytherins and you no longer play pranks?” Seamus asked incredulously.

Hermione shook her head and took another small mouthful of her food. “For your information, there aren’t that many Slytherins in the class.” She said once she had swallowed. “I guess even Snape has his limits when it comes to Crabbe and Goyle.”

“Maybe he’s acting different due to what happened over summer.” Ginny suggested quietly, and the group of friends fell silent.

“I don’t see how Harry helping him would cause him to willingly help Lupin carry things, though.” Ron said. “I mean, didn’t Harry say something about a grudge he had from when he was at school with Lupin and his dad?”

Hermione nodded. “A prank gone wrong I think.” She said. “I think Harry’s dad stopped him from getting really hurt on the full moon, or something like that.”

“Well, whatever it was.” Ginny said, suddenly straightening up and forcing a smile on her face. “It makes for much easier OWL lessons. Though I’m sure Harry will think the sun’s risen in the West when he comes back and sees how he has changed.”

The others laughed, though without the gusto that had been present at the beginning of the meal.

“Do you think he’s ever going to come back?” Neville asked as he scraped the last of the cream from his pudding bowl.

“He’d better.” Ron replied. “The Quidditch team needs him if nothing else. I mean, Ginny is a great seeker and all, but she makes a far better chaser.”

His sister nodded in agreement, “I’m just keeping the broom warm for him.” She said. Ron had lent her Harry’s broom to use, seeing it had still been at the school from when the previous defence professor had confiscated it the year before and had escaped the destruction at the Dursley’s. He had felt, as captain, that its speed and manoeuvrability was more necessary in the seeker position than his own keeper slot. But had refused to give his sister her broom until she had sworn that she would protect it with her life.

“Well, we have our first match against Ravenclaw next week.” Ron said. “And I doubt he’ll be back in time for it.”

“He’d probably refuse to play, anyhow.” Hermione said, “He’d realise that you lot have worked hard to get the team ready. He wouldn’t want to mess it up at the last minute. Anyway, I thought you said practises were going well?”

“They are,” Ron said, “but I bet they would’ve gone a lot better if Harry was here. He would’ve made a better captain for a start.”

Ginny shook her head. “You’re doing alright, Ron.” She said. “You’ve just got to get it into your head that we won without him last year, and we can do it again this year...”

She broke off as Ron’s hands started darting around his body in a panic. “What’s wrong?” she asked.

“That would be great for the pre-match speech.” He said, he stopped fidgeting as the others laughed, his eyes focused on Hermione’s book bag. “Hermione, can I...?”

“C’mon,” Hermione said, standing up and pulling Ron with her. “Let’s go back to the common room.”

“But I want to write it down before I forget it.” Ron whined, but didn’t complain as Hermione took his arm and handed him her book bag. He took it without thinking and shouldered it as Hermione took his hand in hers and led him out the door. Ginny and the others followed close behind, talking about a package of new Weasley Wizarding Wheezes that had been delivered that morning. And high above them, sitting high in the rafters, a phoenix let one pearly tear fall from its glistening eye.

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Later that evening, in the dark Gryffindor common room, Harry sat in his favourite chair by the smouldering fire that was still giving off a great glowing heat. He turned the envelope that contained the letter he had just finished to his friends and sighed.

In it was written how happy he was about their achievements since he had been gone; about Ron’s Quidditch promotion, Ginny’s prefect badge, and the fact they were continuing the DA with Lupin’s help in his absence. All this information he had gathered from the meal and the common room celebrations afterwards. He smiled sadly as he realised how much his friends had changed in the few months he had been gone; Ron had somehow plucked up the courage to ask Hermione out, that would’ve been a sight to see, he thought to himself; Ginny had found the need to continue the twins’ legacy, and had spent the evening with Dean and Seamus tricking the first years into eating various Weasley Wizarding Wheezes products; and Neville had seemed more confident since the incident at the ministry, even offering to help some of the younger years who were struggling over some Herbology homework.

He knew it would be easy to just stay here, surrounded by the familiar sights and smells of the place he called home. It would be as easy as running up to the boy’s dormitory, jump on Ron’s bed and shout “I’m back!” Or there was always the more subtle option of falling asleep on the sofa in the common room, and just wait to be discovered in the morning. He knew that, within a couple of weeks, Marcello and all of her students would be nothing more than a memory.

But he knew that he would always be plagued by the opportunities he would have given up.

Harry absently tapped the letter against his hand and stared into the glowing hearth. Voldemort would still be after him, targeting him at every chance once he found out that Harry had returned to Hogwarts. His friends would once more risk their own lives to stand by his side, just as they had at the Ministry, and the chances of them being caught and hurt... He shut his eyes tightly and refused to think any further. The ultimate point was that the probability of them getting hurt in a confrontation would be lower if he simply wasn't around. And that was how he had concluded his letter.

He bit his lip and nodded. Yes, it would be safer this way, he thought to himself. Besides, there was still so much to learn at Marcello. He had his Dance to develop with the help of Kat and Horus, not to mention he had yet to learn to include wandless magic alongside his sword skills in a duel. The going was far from easy, but he had achieved a lot, and discovered a whole new side to himself by just being there. Now he was training with Sheridan and the others, he was rapidly learning new techniques, and with better feedback than if he were teaching himself. All of which could be used in his prophesised confrontation with Voldemort, and any little advantage could mean the difference between being killed and ridding the world of a monster.

And then there was Kat.

Kat, who had spent all of her young life at the testosterone-run school with its warped sense of honour and its unorthodox methods of teaching. He had really enjoyed his time with her that afternoon, and had felt relaxed and content in her company. He had even promised her that he would take her away from that place, and introduce her to the wizarding world that spread beyond the boundaries of the invisible school. She was right with what he had said earlier; he wasn't the sort to go back on his word in a promise like that.

He took a deep breath and steeled his nerves as he came to his final decision and stood up, heading to the stairs that led to the boy's dormitories. He hesitated briefly outside the room with the plaque

indicating “sixth years” before pushing open the door a crack and leaning in close to listen to the room’s occupants.

He immediately recognised the familiar snores of Ron and Neville, and he thought he could hear a soft sigh from Seamus as he turned over in bed, his mattress springs creaking softly in the way they always had.

He pushed the door open a little wider and stuck his head through the gap, making sure all four Gryffindors were asleep and hidden behind their drapes before stepping across the threshold and letting a cascade of memories fill his senses. His eyes fell upon his own bed standing empty in the corner and he felt his heart pump painfully as he once again realised how much his friends and their support meant to him.

He continued to stare at the bed, recalling fond memories of pillow fights and wake up calls, and the innocent conversations of not-so-innocent topics that the teenage boys had had in that very room during his years at Hogwarts.

A loud noise jarred him from his musings, and he leapt back into the shadows, pulling his black cloak up to cover the bottom half of his face in order to blend into the darkness easier before he realised that the noise had been Dean turning over in his sleep and knocking a book from his bedside cabinet. He let out a puff of relief as the four boys slept on, and took a couple of long strides up to his best friend’s bed, silently egging himself to complete the task and head back to Marcello before he was discovered or had a chance to back out.

He pulled aside Ron’s bed hangings and looked down fondly at his tall, red-haired friend. Ron was sleeping on his front, his nose pressed firmly into his pillow and his mouth slightly open.

“I really miss you, you know? But I have to do this. I need all the help I can get.” Harry murmured, and then jumped as Ron’s head lifted quickly from the pillow.

“Harry?” Ron asked sleepily, reaching out to his bedside table for his wand. He muttered “Lumos” and blearily looked around the dark dormitory for his missing friend.

After a brief scan of his surroundings he came to the conclusion that Harry’s voice must’ve been part of a dream. He failed to notice the breeze that blew through the open window and the open curtains that ran around his bed. As he extinguished his wand and returned it to its place on the table, he also failed to notice the letter that Harry had hastily dropped on the table before he had left. Within moments, Ronald Weasley had fallen back into a deep sleep, none the wiser that his missing friend had ever been in the room.

Chapter 32: Confrontations.

Harry forced himself to stay awake in the corner of the training hall as he polished the armoury and ignored the lesson that was going on around him. He had arrived home during the early hours of the morning, and hadn't got much sleep. After Ron had nearly caught him, Harry had taken a moment to land in the grounds of the school and try out whether his theory about Hogwarts: A History was correct. He had been rather amused when he had managed to apparate from one side of the wide driveway to the other. Though he had soon realised that even apparation within the wards that surrounded the school took a lot of effort, and he had had to fight a dizzy spell to transform back into a phoenix and return to Marcello.

He wondered what Ron's response had been to his letter. He supposed that the red-headed Weasley would have stared at it for quite a long time before daring to pick it up. He hoped that he would've opened it in Hermione's presence; he had addressed it to the both of them. Hermione would have read the letter with a clear mind, and though she might berate him at a later date for staying away so long, he hoped she would understand his reasons for staying away and be able to explain things to Ron.

He stopped polishing for a brief moment as he recalled the night before, and realised what he hadn't done in his attempt to avoid discovery. He had intended to put a phoenix feather on top of the envelope, to make it look like the letter had arrived the same as the others. If Hermione and Ron realised that he had been there and hadn't made an effort to speak with them...

He continued to rub with vigour until he could see his tired face reflecting back at him in the plate metal. He hoped that the letter would clear up a number of his worries, attempting to explain to his friends why he was staying away without revealing too many details of Marcello. He had stressed the point that he missed Hogwarts, and that he wanted to return, but supposed that the mistake he made in his method of delivery would have made that comment void. He rubbed his bleary eyes with the back of one hand, and tried to suppress a yawn that was trying to escape and supposed that nothing could be done about it now. If he were lucky they would

assume that he had used the more common method of delivery like an owl, but, knowing Hermione, she would question why it didn't arrive into the Great Hall like the rest of the post. H

Because of his tiredness and the distracting nature of his thoughts, he wasn't aware that Orson had dismissed the class until the large man stood over him, his hands on his hips and an evil grin plastered across his face.

As soon as the man's shadow fell across him, Harry jumped to his feet, raising his arms in front of him like he had learnt to do in his first lesson with the man.

Orson shook his head. "I never thought that polishing blades could be so mind-consuming?"

"It can become mesmerising, sir!" Harry replied smartly.

He took the chance to glance around the room, and his stomach flipped as he realised that he and Orson were the only two people left in the training hall.

"Indeed." Orson said. "And I'm sure that after such a late night, you'd rather stay here and polish swords than return to your dormitory and get some rest?"

"Sir?" Harry replied.

"Leaving the school grounds is a punishable offence!" Orson stated loudly, stepping away from Harry. "But instead of giving you the direct punishment you deserve, I am willing to use this as a review session. Raise your blade!"

Harry's eyes widened. How could Orson have found out that he had not returned home last night? He supposed that one of the boys in the dormitory had told him about the late hour he had returned. He knew he wouldn't have a chance against the Master. Though the duel could last longer due to his practise in the glade, he doubted that he was ready to take on the bear-animagus. He steeled his resolve as he made his decision. "I won't fight you, sir." He said.

Orson narrowed his eyes. "You dare refuse a direct order?"

"I won't fight you." Harry repeated firmly, wishing that the man would suddenly turn into Snape and give him three weeks worth of cauldron scrubbing rather than challenging him to a fight he knew he would lose.

"And why not?" Orson asked. "I've heard talk between the other students that you have been training with another Master. You know that goes against the rules here at Marcello! I have given you the perfect chance to redeem yourself. Why don't you show me how good you really are?"

Harry shook his head silently.

"Shame, cause I really want to fight you." Orson pulled out his blade and let the light reflect of its polished surface. "Scared?" he asked.

"No" Harry retorted.

Orson spun the blade quickly so it was angled at Harry's face, and stopped it just as it touched the boy's skin. When the boy did nothing more than blink, Orson stepped forward. "So you aren't scared." He said thoughtfully. "Why don't you fight?" Harry stayed quiet, but returned the stony gaze that was levelled his way.

Orson's eyes narrowed as he tried a different approach to get a rise out of the boy. He brought his face closer to Harry's and spoke in a low voice. "I know you have been getting close to my daughter. I hope you realise how dangerous that can be?" Harry still refused to speak, but he took a deep breath to try and calm the anger that had started building inside him, and he could feel one of his jaw muscles ticking in his cheek as he clenched his teeth together. "So it's true then." Orson nodded to himself. "Show me that you are worthy of her attention." He challenged.

The image of Kat lying next to him on the picnic blanket the day before flashed through his mind, and he felt anger at the man who was trying to make her life a misery. But he knew he couldn't fight the

bear-animagus, if only because he loved Kat enough to honour the rest of her family as well. His eyes widened slightly as he realised the connotations of what he had just thought. He loved her.

His attention was pulled back to the present as Orson snarled another question at him, his spittle hitting Harry in the face so much that he had to resist the urge to wipe it away. "I won't fight you." Harry repeated through clenched teeth.

Orson's black eyes glinted dangerously. "You'll have to defend yourself then." He snarled, and swung his blade. There was nothing he could've done to prevent the action, as the pile of swords he had been polishing were out of reach, and he was cornered by the walls of the training hall. Harry saw the weapon flash towards him, but didn't break eye contact with the bear-animagus as he felt the blade connect with his skin.

Once the blade had passed he fell to his knees, one hand clenched around his bleeding torso and the other balancing himself against the floor as the room began to spin.

Harry raised his head to look at his attacker, and saw Orson's eyes widen at the sight of blood seeping through Harry's fingers. He gave a lopsided grin that reminded Harry of Avery's face as the Death Eater had caressed his skin with a knife, and Harry watched with mounting dread as Orson raised the blade above him for a fatal blow. He lowered his head as the sword began to drop; it was never meant to end like this.

But the blade never connected, and Harry winced as he heard metal clash against metal. He opened his eyes to see Leo standing slightly in front of him, his blade pushing firmly against Orson's.

"What the hell do you think you are doing?" the young man yelled at his fellow Master.

"The boy is a waste of time. He does not deserve to be at this school."

"This boy deserves to be here more than most." Leo argued back. "He has practised long and hard by himself. He has earned the chance to be tutored alongside the rest of the boys here."

Orson's eyes narrowed even more, until all Leo could see were slits of blackness. "He refuses to fight." He snarled.

"Not everyone needs an instinct to kill to learn how to wield a blade, Orson. How many times do you have to be reminded of that? How many more students do you have attack and injure before you remember that there is more to this life than bloodshed?"

Orson glared into Leo's eyes, trying to stare the other Master out. This time, however, Leo refused to back down, and Orson eventually dropped his blade and stormed out of the room. Leo watched him leave, breathing deeply to relieve the tension, before turning around to help Harry.

He was shocked to see no sign of the boy, but soon picked up on the trail of blood that led the way to the entrance of the hall. He quickly sheathed his sword and raced out of the door, his feet nimbly stepping around the patchy trail as he hurried along. As he rounded a corner, he collided into another person, and realised he had sent Kat stumbling backwards.

"A bad one, huh?" she asked, the regularity of the sight of Leo chasing an injured student preventing her from becoming too emotional over the occasion. "Need some help? Who was it this time?"

Leo looked at the girl sadly before saying Harry's alias quietly. His heart fell as Kat's face froze. He knew how much she cared about the boy as she often spent her evenings sitting with him in his quarters, having the talks most teenagers' share with their parents.

"No..." she shook her head, her breath coming in short gasps. "Who...?"

"He was confronted by your father. I think he's found out about your weekly meetings."

Kat's eyes narrowed dangerously, and though the girl had inherited her mother's blonde hair and looks, Leo could easily see the similarity between her dark eyes and Orson's black glare. "How dare he...?"

Leo shook his head, and placed his hands on her shoulders. "Not now" he said "We have to find Pi." And she nodded, steeling her shoulders before turning away from him and heading down the corridor. They followed the trail of blood until it led them out of the front door and onto the steps where they promptly disappeared.

Kat felt a sense of panic as she ran down a couple of the steps. "Pyro!" she called. "Pi? Where are you?"

She felt a hand on her shoulder and a glimmer of hope caused her breath to hitch as she spun, but there was only Leo standing there. "Calm down, Kat." He said. "Go and find Horus and Sheridan, they'll probably be in the dining hall. We're going to need them to help find Pyro."

Kat took one last look around the land in front of the school, making sure Harry hadn't collapsed anywhere in the vicinity. "But he'll be okay." She said, as if she were convincing herself. "He's healed himself before..."

"But if he goes unconscious, then he is liable for a visit from Voldemort." Leo reminded her. "It's happened when he first joined your father's class, and will probably happen again. We have to find him. Make sure he's okay."

Kat nodded and started to run back up the steps into the school before her progress was blocked by an elderly man standing in her way. He was dressed in loose fitting trousers and a top that hung from his aged body. His strange appearance was made increasingly so by a large, engraved katana holstered across his back that reached almost to his knees. Kat's eyes widened in shock as she recognised the Doyen who seldom allowed himself to be seen, and her heart stopped as he reached out to rest a hand on her shoulder.

“You two stay here,” he said over her shoulder to Leo. “I’ll find him.”
And with a small nod to Kat he disappeared, leaving them alone on
the steps of the school.

Chapter 33: To kill another....

Harry knelt in the middle of the glade, feeling slightly panicked and panting heavily as he clutched his hands against his stomach. The wound was a clean, deep cut, which had sliced through his shirt and was now oozing steadily, sending small rivulets of crimson blood down towards the waistband of his trousers.

He creased his face up against the pain, and let a small cry of frustration escape his grinding teeth. Why hadn't he fought back?

The first answer that came into his head was Kat. She had been all he could think about when Orson had confronted him. He knew she didn't like her father, that he had treated her badly since her mother died, but he couldn't face fighting the man. He cared too much for Kat to risk hurting Orson and leaving her an orphan like him. He barked out a pain-filled laugh; as if he would've stood a chance against the bear-like man.

Harry cried out, louder than before, as another wave of pain and frustration coursed through his body. He raised his head in the effort to fight against the agony he felt, and through his half-closed eyes he saw a flash of light.

He forced his eyes open further to see a sword stuck into the ground not far from where he sat, and the flash had been the sun glinting off its beautifully engraved surface.

Another surge of pain ripped through his body, forcing Harry to stagger to his feet. He used the pain to propel himself forward until he was able to grip the handle of the katana with one hand and lift it into the air. He took a moment to marvel at its fine features, at the intricate swirls and patterns that were engraved up its curved blade.

He could sense its desire to be used, and took a couple of steely breaths, gripping the handle tightly with both hands. The sword was speaking to him, not with any audible language, but with a power that sang through the muscles in his arms and up into his shoulders.

As the sensation passed through his body, Harry released his pent up emotions by swinging the blade into the air and emitting a loud yell that caused the birds nestling in the tree above him to take flight.

He launched himself into his Dance, fighting against the pain and letting the blade lead his actions. As the blade sliced through the air, he felt his anger and perceptions of pain die away, leaving behind a sense of self-possession. Nothing mattered except for the sword in his hands.

He passed through the familiar motions of stepping forward and to the side, fighting against his imaginary opponent. He didn't allow himself to think about what would come next and was only aware of the way his body moved as one with the sword. He let his blank mind and responsive body follow the shameless needs of the katana.

As the routine neared its end, Harry slashed the blade up into the air, letting his back arch with the movement until his feet lifted from the earth and his hands hit the floor, the blade resting on the ground under his right palm. His body sailed gracefully through the air, and Harry tightened his grip around the blade as his hands came to leave the floor again.

His feet just about managed to hit the earth at the right angle, and Harry was able to keep his balance for the first time and straightened up. He swung the katana up into the air once more, bringing it down in a slashing motion in front of him and ended the Dance on one knee, the sword held firmly against the ground.

He barely dared to breathe as he realised that he had completed the Dance for the first time. He felt the sweat drip down his face and back, and yet felt strangely energised, the open wound in his stomach forgotten as the adrenalin coursed through his veins and he thought over what he had just achieved.

"Your Dance is coming along well," a low voice from behind him said.

Harry spun around on his knees, staggering to his feet as a figure materialised from the shadows around the glade.

Before him stood an old man, the skin hanging limply from his face and neck in folds as if he had shrunk and it no longer fit properly. His wispy hair was long enough to be tied into a white plait at the back of his neck, and he walked towards Harry slowly, each step placed carefully in case he lost his balance.

Despite his age and frailty, the man gave off an aura that rivalled Dumbledore's, and tacitly demanded respect from the younger boy in front of him. Harry felt obliged to drop again to his knees, his head lowered in deference and one hand clutched against his stomach as the pain began to return. The other was still wrapped tightly around the handle of the katana.

The old man held out his arm, and Harry saw a skeletal hand appear in his field of vision. He looked up to see an unspoken question in the elderly man's grey eyes, and reluctantly passed the blade over to him, consciously forcing himself to release the grip he had on the handle to the contorted hand of the Doyen.

The man nodded once with acceptance as he took the blade, then walked past Harry towards the lake, climbing the rock with agility not expected from a man of his age to stare out over the water.

Harry stayed where he knelt with his back facing the man, trying to gather his errant thoughts together. The man who had just taken the blade from him was obviously the Doyen. Harry could think of no one else who would have the experience or the honour to be in possession of such a blade. His appearance in the glade confused Harry. Not only was the man much older than he had expected, but he had also ignored the obvious pain the boy was in, choosing instead to deliberately place his blade within reach for Harry to use.

The sixteen year old could not deny that he felt better after performing the Dance, even though his wound had opened further and was still bleeding steadily. The katana that he had been holding had given him the extra inspiration he had needed to complete the Dance, and the sense of achievement Harry felt rivalled anything he had ever felt before. It took all Harry's restraint not to spin around and forcibly take the sword away from the frail man, if only to perform the

Dance again and once more feel the euphoric thrill he had just experienced.

He closed his eyes and forced himself to calm down. Once he felt his heart rate return to normal, Harry turned his head to look over his shoulder at the man. The Doyen continued to stand, silent and still, on top of the rock facing over the water. The blade was nowhere to be seen.

Harry pushed himself to his feet and turned around to face the lake. After a few moments of weighing up his options, he stepped forward and painstakingly climbed up onto the rock, coming to a halt beside the Doyen.

He looked down to see a look of eerie anticipation in the shorter man's face, and Harry became aware of a sudden change in the usually welcoming forest. The birds had stopped singing, and Harry could see no creatures making their way to the banks of the lake to quench their thirsts. Even the water was unnaturally still; not a ripple marring its mirror-like surface as it reflected the afternoon sky.

Harry hardly dared breathe as he felt the air thicken around him. He could feel it push onto his body from all sides, as if it were waiting for something to release the pressure.

He sensed rather than saw the movement next to him and turned to see the old man nodding slowly, as if he had come up with the answer to an unasked question.

"Have you ever wanted to make the water move?"

Harry frowned, he could hear his blood pumping through his veins, and the unnatural atmosphere that had descended upon the area around the lake was making him feel agitated. "I – I don't think I understand." He said.

"You have a very special gift, my boy." The Doyen said, still not meeting Harry's eyes. "One which I believe can help you with your quest. But it needs to be awoken..."

Harry watched as the man turned to him, and he fought the urge to run as the man calmly met his emerald gaze and raised his arms until his hands hovered on either side of Harry's face.

The Doyen gave a nod of encouragement before he allowed his gnarled hands to make contact with Harry's head. Almost instantly Harry felt all the muscles in his body contract and a strange heat course through his veins, creating the sensation that he was burning from the inside out. He could hardly hear himself screaming over the roaring in his ears, and he was barely aware that he had fallen to his knees, a strong wind blowing violently around him.

Almost as soon as the pain had started, it was over. The Doyen slowly released his hands from the boy's face and smiled slightly. He watched as Harry tried to focus his emerald eyes on the old man before they rolled back and he slid into unconsciousness, then stood and walked away.

As he made his way across the clearing, he was once more reminded of the time when he had first learnt about his powers and Danced as a free spirit in the glade. He turned as he reached the line of trees and pursed his lips slightly and looked back at the unmoving body lying on the rocks. "You have to start early, my boy," he said to the silence. "and for that I am sorry." A smile appeared on his face as he nodded his head again. "Use them well." he said and disappeared into the trees, leaving Harry alone and unconscious on the banks of the lake.

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Harry slowly awoke to a number of contrasting sensations. The first thing he became aware of was the gentle sound of rain splashing into the lake, and rhythmically pattering onto the leaves above him. And yet he felt quite dry. He frowned as a shiver passed through his body, and relaxed as warmth spread from his lower abdomen, flowing through his veins until his fingers and toes once again felt like they belonged to him.

He forced his eyes open and groggily registered that it was afternoon by the height of the sun peeking through the fast moving rain clouds

and momentarily blinding him. He angled his head away the rock beneath him to examine the origin of the strange heat, and his eyes were met with the image of his torn and bloodied shirt. The sudden influx of the memories triggered by the sight made him groan and drop his head back onto the ground, as images of Orson raising his sword above him and the Doyen standing against the backdrop of the lake flashed behind his closed eyelids.

After a couple of minutes of gathering his thoughts together, Harry once more became aware of the sound of rain falling around him and that he was still lying out in the open. He cracked open his eyes and turned his head until he was looking at the sky, and was amazed to find that there seemed to be nothing above him sheltering him from the downpour.

He reached an arm up to the grey clouds, but when his hand didn't find the resistance of any sort of shield he brought his arm back down and pushed himself up into a sitting position.

After waiting a few moments for the dizziness he experienced to reside, he looked behind him, staring numbly as the rain began to darken the dry patch of rock he had been lying on.

He once again reached out a hand, this time to his side, and marvelled as the rain drops seemed to bend around his body, coming close yet never touching his skin. "How...?" he murmured, before looking around him, hoping to see whoever it was that had cast a spell to keep him dry in such a way.

His thoughts went back to the Doyen standing before him the day before, his hands hovering beside his face and the pain he had felt when the old man had gripped his head. Maybe he cast an impervious charm on me before he left, Harry thought, before immediately questioning why the Doyen had left him outside all night in the first place.

His eyes widened in shock as he finally registered what time of day it was, and pushed himself quickly to his feet, staggering as the world span around him, and found that he had to rest his hands on his knees before the dizziness would pass.

It was mid-afternoon, which meant he was late for class and would result in another confrontation with Kat's father. Harry stood still, his hands still on his knees and took some deep breaths. As he looked down he once more noticed his torn shirt, and released one hand from his knee to examine his wound. He could still feel the strange warmth being emitted by the gash, and with a look of revulsion creasing his face, gently scratched away at some of the dry blood, revealing a partially healed wound underneath.

He supposed that the warmth he was feeling in the area was due to the healing qualities had come with his animagus form, though he had never been conscious to experience it before. He briefly sighed with relief as he realised that he had had no visions of Voldemort, as being unconscious was the only times he experienced them now had developed some sort of Occlumency skill against the Dark Lord's mental intrusions. He hoped this was due to the fact nothing had happened, rather than having the unconsciousness forced upon him by the Doyen.

Harry slowly straightened, careful not to jar his stomach too much as it healed, and started through the trees to the direction of the school. He wondered what it was that the Doyen had done to him the night before, and let his feet guide him along the now-familiar track as he once more went over what had happened.

"Whatever he did, it hurt like hell." Harry finally muttered to himself, then was brought up short by a large tree that had fallen across his path. He frowned at the thick trunk, and looked to his right to see that the roots had been pulled free from the ground. It reminded him of Hagrid's giant brother, Grawp, pulling up smaller trees in the Forbidden Forest, and he nervously remembered Hagrid's insistence that his brother had been "so small!".

He stood still, relying on his senses to tell him if anything was around or watching him. All he could hear was the rain hitting the canopy high above him, and the birds chirruping as they flew between the trees. After a while, he released a breath that he hadn't realised he had been holding, and transformed himself into his Phoenix form,

spreading his wings and lightly gliding over the trunk that stood as high as himself before transforming back.

He half registered the fact that the wound across his stomach had radiated a greater intensity of heat in the moment he had transformed back into himself, and he briefly wondered if he would heal any quicker if he stayed in phoenix form. He quickly experimented and happily realised that the wound no longer hurt nor hindered him whilst he was in phoenix form. He spread his wings again and took off from the ground, enjoying the freedom of swooping between the branches of the forest, absently noting the large number of fallen trees below him.

He transformed back into himself as the trees began to thin, and started walking quickly back to the distant school building, grateful that his wound was pretty much healed, and casting a small cleaning spell on himself to get rid of the dark blood that stained his clothes and was caked to his skin.

As he neared the school, he became aware of a great deal of excitement as a number of students walked across the grounds in front of him, heading to the amphitheatre carrying a number of planks of wood, and in deep and animated discussion. He wondered if something had happened whilst he was away, and was glad to see Kat sitting on a sheltered part of the wall at top of the steps, her long hair falling over her back and her head lowered as she read a book.

“Hey, Kat.” He said as he climbed the steps. “What’s happened? Did I miss....?”

His questions were cut-off as Kat dropped the book she had been reading, spun to face him and threw her arms around him in an embrace.

“Oh, Pi, I was so worried about you.” she said into his shoulder. Harry frowned a little, wondering who had told her about his incident with Orson the day before. “Leo and I followed you out here, and we were going to get the others to help search but then the Doyen...” she broke off and stepped away from him, her eyes wide but still

glistening slightly with unshed tears. "The Doyen said he would look for you...?"

Harry nodded. "He found me." He said. "Over the past few weeks I've been training on the banks of a lake in the forest, and apparated there once I got out of the school. I have a funny suspicion that he's been there before..." he shook his head slightly, dismissing the thought from his mind. "Anyway, what's been going on here? Everyone seems well excited."

Kat's eyes widened. "You mean you didn't feel it?"

"Feel what?"

"There was a big earthquake here last night." She said. "We nearly lost one of the storage buildings behind the amphitheatre. Are you sure you didn't feel it?"

Harry thought for a moment before shaking his head. All he could remember was the intense pain inflicted onto him by the Doyen, though he supposed the earthquake did explain the number of fallen trees in the forest. "I passed out," he explained. "I guess I must've been too far gone to feel it."

Kat nodded, but still seemed a little disbelieving of his story, and pulling up his torn shirt to examine his stomach with cold fingers. "You okay now?" she asked, and Harry laughed, taking her hand and removing it from his skin.

"I'm fine," he assured her. "I've found out that I can heal faster if I transform." he said, and Kat's eyes widened slightly, before glancing around, making sure no one was within hearing distance.

"Wow." She said. "That's a useful talent to have."

"Would be even more useful if I can get it to work for other people as well." Harry said. "I still reckon it's all something to do with the blood. But I can't do anything without getting a sample."

"I'll take one for you sometime." Kat said with a smile, and bent to pick up her book. "So, what did the Doyen want?" She asked, following Harry into the school building.

Harry shrugged. "I don't really know." He said. "He told me that my Dance was progressing well, and then stood on the banks of the lake for a while before leaving."

Kat frowned. "That's all?" she asked. "But that's really... odd."

Harry nodded in agreement, berating himself from not telling her about his successful Dance with the Doyen's sword and the pain he had felt from the Doyen's strange actions afterwards, but he couldn't think of a way to describe the situation without it sounding crazy. He chuckled to himself, sliding one arm around Kat's waist and grinning as she looked up at him. The whole thing was crazy. Now he was standing in the corridor, without any pain clouding his memory and looking into Kat's dark eyes, he wondered whether or not the whole thing had really happened. His ability to repel water he attributed to the Doyen casting an impervious charm on him, or something similar, which still left a whole load of other questions needing to be answered.

He stopped in the corridor, his eye contact with Kat not breaking as he gently ran his hand down the side of her face. "I'm sorry for my father's actions..." she started, but Harry silenced her with a finger on her lips, before leaning in for a kiss.

As their lips touched, his eyes grew wide with shock; what had possessed him to kiss her? He was glad her eyes were shut as he pushed the thought aside, and deepened the kiss slightly.

They were interrupted by the sound of footsteps in the corridor branching off from theirs, and Kat's eyes glazed over slightly. "That's my father's class..." she murmured, and Harry recognised the corridor as being the one that he had run down the day before when he was injured.

Harry quickly glanced around, and after spotting a hiding place, pulled on Kat's hand, spinning her around and pushing her into the

shadows of the deep-set doorway before stepping into the corridor to face the students who had just rounded the corner.

A small number of them he recognised from his class, and they shot him interested glances as they passed in the wide corridor. He also spotted Conway and Todd walk towards him with a group of boys from their own class. They sent him a questioning look as he stood stock-still in the middle of the corridor, and their eyes widened as they neared him, spying his torn shirt and the dark figure of Kat hiding in the doorway.

They tried to push their way through the crowd towards him, but their efforts were futile as the sound of an animalistic growl at the other end of the corridor caused the other students to stop and turn to see what the commotion was.

“Well, well.” The hard voice sent a shiver down Harry’s spine, and his emerald eyes met the black holes of Orson’s gaze. “Look who’s decided to return? Do you think you have enough skill to be here, boy?”

Harry forced down a wave of rage as the man walked towards him. “If I am not allowed to fight the golden child, maybe we should test your skills another way.” He looked around the crowd of young men, and Harry glanced to his right, seeing Brogan standing solidly in front of the doorway where Kat was hidden, her face peering from the shadows around his shoulder, and his thick arm preventing her from charging out into the corridor.

“Tocho!” Harry’s head snapped round to see a tall student in his late teens step forward. He heard a gasp from his left where Todd and Conway were now standing, and at the same instant recognised the boy to be the one who had attacked Conway that time. “I believe you are up for promotion, are you not?” Tocho, turned from his tutor, and looked towards Harry, his lips parting to reveal pointed teeth in a feral grin. He gave a quick nod and drew his sword, performing a few warm up swings as the two of them made their way closer to Harry.

"I will not fight." Harry repeated the mantra that had been going through his head the day before.

Orson shook his head in mock regret. "I'm afraid you have no choice, boy." He said. "Do you think we don't know who really are?" Harry froze, resisting the urge to raise his hands and pull his hair over his face. Since it had grown, he had taken to tying it up high on his head where it no longer hid the scar from view. "How long did you think it would be before one of us challenged you? How long before you think we would want to fight you, just so we could tell the tale of beating the boy-who-lived? I've heard all about you, boy, and it seems to be that you aren't all the history books have portrayed you to be? A baby wizard with a strength that no one can explain? Pah! More like a boy who screams for his parents every night as he sleeps!"

Harry's eyes narrowed at his reference to his dreams. Even though he had found a way to block Voldemort from his mind, Occlumency did nothing from stopping his own mind conjuring images of Sirius falling through the veil, of the lifeless eyes of Cedric Diggory lying beside him in graveyard, and the grey, ghost-like images of his parents emerging from Voldemort's wand.

Orson grinned at the fire that had lit itself in Harry's eyes. "He is ready." He muttered to Tocho. The young man nodded his head once, showing he understood, and raised his sword high, charging the last few yards towards Harry with a yell.

Harry stared at the oncoming attack without really comprehending its meaning. Before he could respond, he felt a sword thrust into his left hand, and briefly saw the encouraging nod Conway shot him as the wolf-animagus pulled back his hand, his actions hidden by Todd who stood beside him.

Harry briefly looked down at the blade, before his head snapped up to face the attack. Without thinking, he swung the blade into the air, bringing his stronger right hand around to support its weight as metal clashed against metal. Harry didn't hold back, just let his emotions take over his actions. Their parrying felt so different from the

emotionless calm he felt during his Dance, but he accepted the heat in his arms as he swung the blade angrily.

The fight was over as soon as it was started, and a silence fell over the previously raucous corridor as they stared at the body at Harry's feet, his life-blood still oozing from the deep hole that had appeared in his chest.

Harry stared at the boy's blank eyes in shock, their lifeless gaze imprinting themselves on his dreams for many nights to come. With a small start, Harry looked desperately around the sea of faces, trying to find some answer to what had just happened. His eyes briefly met with those of Conway and Todd to his left, and also with Leo and Horus, who stood further down the corridor and had pushed themselves to the front of the crowd to see what was happening. He refused to meet the greedy glare of Orson, and instead looked to his right, looking past Brogan to lock with Kat's dark eyes. Her facial expression mirrored the shock and numbness that he felt in his own body, and he shook his head slightly, trying to convince himself that this wasn't happening.

"How does it feel to kill your first?" Orson asked icily, his voice spearing through the corridor and unleashing an overwhelming sense of emotion in the boy standing before him.

Guilt caused Harry to jerk away from the blade in his hand, letting it fall on top of the inert body at his feet. He took a few deep breaths as he stared at his own handiwork, before moistening his dry lips slightly. "How do you know that was my first?" he asked shakily, before spinning away from the scene and pushing his way through the crowds.

Chapter 35: Finding peace

"Pyro, are you okay? Conway and Todd followed you, then came to tell me where you were..."

Harry continued to stand on the rock that overhung the lake, staring out at the still water. Kat walked slowly into the clearing, her eyes taking in the mystic qualities of the lake, but not recognising its beauty as the sun began to set, sending a red glow through the trees.

"Pi?"

"No."

That one word sent an icy chill through Kat's veins and she hesitantly stepped up to the silhouette of the figure until she stood just behind his shoulder. "Do you want to talk about it?" she asked.

Harry didn't move for a long moment, but then he turned to face her, and she could see his eyes sparkling unnaturally with unshed tears. "I can't do this." He said.

"Do what?"

Harry turned back to the lake and swallowed hard before explaining further. "This whole fighting thing, it isn't for me. No one deserves to die."

"You really think that?" she asked. "Cause I don't believe it. Some people, like Voldemort... like my father... they can't be saved Pyro. They may have been human once but they've gone bad, and all they do is cause misery for everyone they come across."

"That boy didn't deserve to die."

"You're right." Kat agreed, her eyes filling with tears. "He didn't. But it was his own fault he got involved. And though I'm rather glad it wasn't, that fight was meant to be between you and my father. He should have realised that and kept out of it. He broke the rules, Pi, and you shouldn't blame yourself for what happened."

“But I don’t play by Marcello rules.” Harry said, spitting out the name of the hateful school. “And I refuse to live by them.”

“That’s fine. And I’d even encourage that.” Kat said. “It would certainly create a better school to learn in. But you have to realise that a lot of these boys have been here for a long time, and this is the way they live. It’s the only way they know how to live.”

Harry snorted, shaking his head, and Kat watched a solitary tear fall from the emerald eye nearest her and fall down his cheek. “But it’s so wrong.” He said, and looked down at his hands. “There’s a part of me that’s gentle and kind... I know its there because I can feel it. But as soon as I picked up that blade all those kind feelings seemed to disappear. It’s like there is more evil and desire for destruction than goodness inside me, and there’s more wanting to hurt or kill than to love or care.” He looked up at Kat. “What if it takes over?”

Kat smiled through the tears that had soaked her face. “I won’t let it.” she said quietly, touching the side of his warm face with her palm. “And neither will you. These aren’t your thoughts, Pi; they belong to Him. You can fight, yes, but so can a Phoenix. And you told me yourself that they don’t know hate, nor darkness. You fight for the right reasons, Pi, to protect those you care about and to help those who are innocent. You are full of goodness. You just have to realise that and tap into those feelings.”

For one moment, Kat thought she had gotten through to the tall, long-haired boy in front of her. His eyes softened, and she could see them fill up with more tears as he thought about what she had said. But almost as soon as he made eye contact with her, he pulled away and leapt lightly off the rock.

“That’s all that matters, though, isn’t it?” he shouted. “Fighting? I’m a soldier. A weapon! And I’m here for one thing only. I have to defeat him, no matter how many of my friends end up dying on the way. Maybe it would be best if I just didn’t care.” His voice fell away in defeat, a sob threatening to escape his chest. “Maybe... maybe if he

realises I no longer care, no one will get hurt. And I won't feel bad about having to kill anyone."

"No, Pi! You're wrong. When will you realise that?" Kat shouted at him through her tears. "It's your compassion for your friends that is going to get you through this. You can't just push them away. Your love for them and their love for you will give you all the motivation you need. And when it's all over, they'll still be there to welcome the Pyro... the Harry they love back into their arms. They won't desert you, Harry. And I'll be there with them."

Harry looked up at her, his breath hitching in his chest as she said his real name. It had been a long time since he had heard someone speak it out loud. "You will?" he asked, the innocent hope in his voice causing Kat to smile.

"Of course I will, you ass" she said and stepped closer to him. "When will you realise how much you mean to me? How much the real you means to me?" she took one of his hands into her own, and idly ran her fingers up his arm. "You're a lot like me, Harry. All your life you have been hidden away, been forced to be something you're not. You need to find who you really are, and concentrate on being Just Harry for once."

"Maybe I don't know who Just Harry is." Harry said in a low voice as Kat's hand cupped his face and stepped closer. "When I was younger I was always the freak, and once I made it to Hogwarts I was suddenly something completely different, a hero for doing something I don't even remember. How do I know which one is really me?"

Kat looked deep into his eyes. "Neither." She said.

"Neither?"

Kat nodded. "The real Harry is standing before me now." She said. "He's brave, and strong. But he's also human. He is caring and occasionally shy and would do anything for those he loves. That's what makes you you"

"A hero complex?" Harry murmured, moving his face closer to Kat's.

“No” Kat whispered back. “Just a man with a heart.”

They fell into the kiss, starting off with tender brushes of their lips before increasing the pressure and ending up in a passionate embrace. It was Kat who started taking off their clothes, running her hands up Harry’s chest as she hitched up his torn shirt to pull it over his head.

“Wait, Kat.” Harry stopped her and gasped out her name. “Are you sure about this?” he asked.

Kat nodded thoughtfully. “I want to be with you, Harry. There’s just something about you that I... I want to go back to Hogwarts with you, and I want to be with you.”

Harry stood unmoving as Kat licked her lips nervously. “Would you have me?” she asked him again. “I don’t ever want to leave you, Harry.”

Harry gave a small groan as he lowered his head to kiss her again, giving into the desires that flared through his body. He was vaguely aware of the sound of phoenix song echoing through the woods as he lowered her to the ground of the glade and gently laid himself down beside her. Once again, every thing was forgotten as he lived for the moment, relishing every movement she made against him, until their cries rang through the night, and the woods once more fell silent.

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Harry woke up in the glade by the lake for the second day running, this time to the sun shining through the leaves above him and warming his face. He sighed as he basked in the warmth with a strange sense of contentment that allowed him to stretch languidly against the soft cushion of leaves and moss.

It took him a few moments to open his eyes and look around, and almost instantly he shot up into a sitting position, his head darting around as he searched for Kat. It didn’t take him long to realise that she was gone, and that he had been lying alone in the glade with only

his trousers on and his torn shirt rolled up behind his head as a makeshift pillow.

He thought back to the day before, and a sudden shiver went through him as he remembered what he had done. He had actually killed someone, and he felt horrid because of it. The memory of the boy's eyes staring blankly up into his, blood pooling around his body made Harry pull his legs up to his chest protectively.

He pushed the thoughts aside before dwelling on them too long, knowing that they would surely return to plague his dreams, and again reverted to thinking about Kat and the bonds they had formed the night before. He smiled to himself as he eventually recalled the moment when she had left. He had been half asleep, and it had seemed like a dream when she untangled herself from his arms and kissed him gently before standing up and leaving the glade.

She had saved him the night before, and he knew it. By staying with him and showing her love for him, she had prevented him from giving up on himself completely and succumbing to the cold hatred that ruled Voldemort's life. His hands balled into fists from where they rested upon his raised knees, and he made a silent pact with himself: He would never kill again until he was faced with Voldemort. That one man had caused more fear and sadness than anyone else he knew, and deserved to die more than anyone else. Once this quest was completed, Harry knew he could then continue with his own life, and be able to embrace the love and friendship his friends offered him without having to fear for their lives.

He pulled himself to his feet, shaking the stray leaves from his shirt before putting it on, and quickly brushing his trousers off as he walked to the lakeside. He knelt above the water and looked down, surprised at the reflection he saw. His hair, still mussed from being slept in, was falling from its tie, framing his face down to his chin. His eyes, no longer hidden behind thick lenses, held a light he had never seen in himself before. He smiled as he recognised a similar shine to them that he had often seen in Dumbledore's eyes, and took it to be due to his new acceptance. Some things just had to be done, even if they did involve taking another's life. But it was the ability to live past the

dark and embrace the love that others gave, never taking for granted what was there, that made it all worthwhile.

He plunged his hands into the clear water, scooping up a handful of the cool liquid and splashing it over his face. Feeling refreshed, he also took a few handfuls of water to drink, before standing up, stretching, and breathing deeply in the salubrious morning air.

He pulled himself up onto the overhanging rock, and sat himself down with his legs hanging off the edge, like he had when he had first discovered the clearing. The morning was lovely, and he felt disinclined to go back to the school and burst the life-embracing bubble that surrounded him at the moment.

His musings were shattered when he heard footsteps behind him, and a deep but familiar voice say "Kat told us we would find you here,"

Harry jumped up, spinning to see Leo standing beside the Doyen, both dressed in battle robes and armed. He noted that the older man was equipped only with the katana Harry had handled the day before, and his robes no longer looked as menacing as they probably once did.

Leo stayed where he was standing, moving only to cross his arms as the Doyen closed the distance to the rock, and took Harry's automatically offered hand as he climbed up beside him.

Harry felt a keen sense of déjà vu as the man looked out over the water, but the oppressive atmosphere didn't manifest itself like it had the day before.

"Have you ever wanted to make the water move?" The man repeated the same phrase that had flummoxed Harry the day before.

Harry glanced towards Leo, who stood with an emotionless face that clearly indicated that he would not be of any help. Harry shook his head again, not really understanding what the question meant. He looked over the water, hoping to see something that would help him solve this riddle, and eventually bent to scoop up small stone from the

ground below him. He took one last glance at the Doyen, who was still refusing to meet the boy's eye, before throwing the stone into the water.

He watched as the small splash sent ripples running through the relatively calm surface; he had made the water move. He looked to the Doyen to see what the experienced fighter would make of his actions.

He watched as the old man shut his colourless eyes, and felt a strange power pulse from the frail body. Harry yelped as he watched the small ripples he had caused turn into three foot waves, washing up over the bow of the outcrop, and making him jump back to avoid getting wet.

"For nearly a century I have been looking for another to guide in the art of controlling the elements." The old man had not moved as the wave had covered the rock, and Harry stared wide eyed as the water ran around the man, much as the rain had not touched him the day before. "And for many of those years I have stayed at this school, certain that another who possessed this ability would find his way here to me." The old man turned to Harry, who was staring blankly at him. "The ability to manipulate the four elements is a blessing, allowing you access to the greatest power on the Earth. But it is also a curse. The power often becomes too much to control, and you have to be aware of your limits. You also have to understand that you are required to find another worthy enough to be taught these skills before you are relieved of your burden."

He sighed slightly. "I am almost two-hundred years old. And have been searching for you for over two-thirds of my life. I am sorry to have had to burden you with this power at such an early age, but you must understand that I am tired. I want to rest."

Harry wet his dry lips, subconsciously fingering the tear in his shirt as he stood before the Doyen. "The pain... what you did to me...?"

The Doyen nodded, and walked off the rock, quietly murmuring "I am sorry" as he passed Harry.

The man turned again once he reached Leo. "I will train you in how to control the elements." He said, once more taking on an authoritative voice. "Over the past few years I have been instructing Leo on what an elemental is capable of, though he does not have the power to control them himself. You see, time is short now I have awakened the power within you. But whilst I am here I will teach you how to control and respect the elements. From then on, it is up to you, with Leo's guidance, to use these powers as you will."

Harry nodded, still not completely comprehending what was happening. "What, exactly, is it that I can do, sir?" he asked nervously.

The Doyen smiled and held out one hand to the lake. Harry watched as a small whirlpool started in the shallows, before the centre rose so that an inverted spiral rested on the top of the water. The spiral moved across the surface, before making its way over the ground and jumping to the Doyen's hand.

"I am particularly talented with using the water element." He said, causing the water in his hand to take on different shapes. "Though I am also able to manipulate earth and fire." He smiled at Harry. "I admit I am not that adept at controlling the air element, it is too unpredictable for my liking."

"Which one will I be able to control?" Harry asked, coming closer, captivated by the swirling ball of water hovering above the Doyen's gnarled hand.

"I imagine all of them, to some extent." The old man replied. "Though, like me, you will probably find some elements that you are stronger with, and others you will find more difficult."

Leo smiled as Harry looked at them in wonder. "Seeing your affinity with your phoenix form, I doubt you will have any problems with the fire element." He said. "Though we will work our way through them steadily. It is most important to be able to control them, as they can be highly unpredictable and extremely dangerous when unleashed. And the power and concentration needed to control one is very tiring, very seldom will a wizard have the strength to be able to

simultaneously control two or more elements without it being hazardous to their well-being.”

Harry nodded in understanding. “When will I learn?” he asked.

“Every morning. Instead of going to Orson’s class you will come here.” The Doyen replied, seeming to forget about the whirling element in his hand. “Leo and I will come and instruct you, not only with the elements, but also with skills which will hone your ability to use them in a duel alongside your sword and magic.” He smiled slightly. “It seems like it comes full circle, as I was taught how to control the elements in this very same spot.”

Harry smiled at the reminiscing tone of the old man, and realised now that it was probably more than coincidence that he had found this spot to train.

“We’ll also encourage you to further your skills with Kat, Horus and the rest of your group.” Leo continued. “We’ve been watching the way you practise together, and can see how much you have all improved in the few weeks you have known each other. They will be able to give you the practical experience you need, and I will attend to give you all extra guidance and support.”

“Do you think I’ll be able to use this against Voldemort,” Harry asked Leo, shooting a quick look towards the Doyen, unsure of whether or not the old man was aware of his link to the Dark Lord.

The old man nodded. “I assure you it will be most useful.” He said. “Elementals, though known to exist, are extremely rare... and well respected for their gifts. The only reason I have kept the position of Doyen for so long is because I never fight a fair fight, for there is nothing another wizard can do if you decide to unleash an element against him.”

Harry recognised the tone of the school running through the old man’s words, about never fighting fair to win a fight, but Harry wasn’t interested in using his new talents in that way. He respected that now he had the ability to control something immense, and privately added to his previous pact that he would not misuse these new abilities. He

smiled at the two men in front of him and nodded once, knowing that this is what he had to do, what he had to become. And for once, he was actually quite content about it.

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Chapter 35: Another Vision

“NO! Pi, how many times do I have to tell you not to hold your sword like that as you roll? There’s no way you’d be able to focus any spells if your hand is trapped like that. Now, up! Start again!”

Harry dragged himself from the floor and took his place next to Conway and Brogan as they faced up against Brandon, Sheridan and Todd. “Is he always like this?” he muttered, brushing his sweaty bangs out of his face with the back of his wrist.

Conway laughed once. “You’re complaining? After what Orson did to you?”

Harry thought for a few minutes, trying to regain his composure from the rigorous training Leo had just put him through. “I guess not.” he said, shifting his grip on the hilt of his sword so that it was held balanced in his hand.

Since he had started his training sessions with Leo and the Doyen, he had been given a choice of blades to fight with and had chosen one of a similar weight and shape as the katana the Doyen had let him use once, though this blade was slightly shorter in length. With his daily training with the Doyen, and with Leo overseeing the groups’ regular meetings, he was now almost as agile with his sword as the other boys. All he had to do now was master the ability to use it alongside casting spells and defensive shields.

He looked down at the wand Brogan held tightly in his hand. When Harry had asked about this they had explained that it was often very difficult to control magic whilst having to concentrate on something else, such as a swordfight or defending yourself. Because of this, it was the choice of many of the Marcello students to use a wand during their duels, as it allowed for greater accuracy and more predictable outcomes than using wandless magic.

He frowned slightly, a sense of apprehension growing deep in his chest as he watched the other team break apart and take their positions along one of the training marks on the floor. He took a deep

breath, trying to steady his nerves, but jumped as a heavy hand landed on his shoulder.

"You ready?" Brogan asked, gazing down at the shorter boy, a slight flicker of concern passing through his soft brown eyes.

Harry gave his head a quick shake, and the unusual feeling passed. He frowned slightly, reaching a hand up to rub at his scar. It had been a long time since he had felt anything from Voldemort, but he had never felt anything like nervousness come through the link.

"Pi?" Harry looked to his left, where Conway had joined Brogan in staring at him with concerned eyes.

"I'm fine." He said, nodding his head. He raised his sword and directed it at the others, where Sheridan was doing a bad imitation of a war dance, and the others were rolling their eyes at him. He glanced to his right, where Kat, Horus and Leo were standing, watching the proceedings and ready to come back with any feedback for the combatants. "Let's go!"

The three of them to their positions along the line, and almost instantly Sheridan dropped his tomfoolery to raise his sword. Harry mentally shook his head: The horse-animagus was as unpredictable as a wild-mustang, and could go from being as mischievous as the Weasley twins to being as serious as McGonagall in the blink of an eye.

"Be prepared!" Horus announced the beginning of the fight from the sidelines, and the six combatants calmed themselves, eyeing each other's postures in the hope that they could glean some information about their intentions. The seconds seemed to stretch into an eternity, but still neither team moved.

"Fight!"

Almost instantly, the distance between the two teams was closed, and the clashing of blades echoed through the air. Harry found himself up against the dark figure of Brandon. The boy was slightly shorter, though his reflexes were evenly matched with Harry's. They

parried for a short time, before Harry saw a movement from his left, and flung up a hand to produce a reflective shield against the curse Brandon had thrown at him.

The curse ricocheted harmlessly off into the air, and Harry spun to the left, a spell already leaving his palm as he returned to face Brandon. His sword followed closely behind the spell, to be awkwardly blocked by the raven-animagus as he struggled to escape both the curse and the oncoming swing. Harry raised his sword again with both hands, though he was prepared to produce another shield should Brandon recover enough to send another curse his way.

As he began to drop the blade, a sharp crack resounded through the air, and Harry stumbled forward a few steps as the weight of his blade suddenly disappeared.

It was common practise for Masters to collect in the blades at the end of the fight or during practise as a way of preventing unfair injury to an already beaten opponent, or to point out some further training points. And as Harry glanced about him he saw all six boys were still standing, so assumed it was the latter reason for the Leo to have collected in the blades. He turned to see Horus, Kat and Leo striding towards them, leaving a pile of their swords at the place where they had been standing out of the way of stray curses.

"Once again, Pyro, you must not allow yourself to be undefended at any point." Leo said as soon as he came up.

"But I had a defensive shield all ready." Harry insisted.

"And I was hardly going to be able to get off any curses in the position I was in." Brandon admitted with an embarrassed laugh. "I was off-balance. He would've overcome me within a couple of swings."

Leo shook his head at the two boys. "Where were you standing?" he asked Harry. Harry thought briefly before taking a couple of steps backwards. "And where were you standing?" Leo asked Sheridan, who grinned like a cheshire cat and stepped to a point about five yards over Harry's left shoulder. "You were not watching your back."

Leo said to Harry, who frowned as Sheridan winked at him. "You are going to have to work on developing a shield that will surround you at all times, so that you know who and what is likely to harm you."

Harry nodded, looking thoughtful as Sheridan started laughing. "Hey, don't feel so bad." He said, coming closer and throwing a casual arm over Harry's shoulder. "After all, you are the baby of the group." he reached over and pinched Harry's cheek.

Harry tried to pull away in annoyance, but Sheridan refused to let him go, instead taking to ruffling his hair. Harry shut his eyes in a moment of deep concentration, and soon felt the wind pick up around him. His battle robes billowed in the gust, and Sheridan yelped as the sudden wind caused him to overbalance and let go of the elemental.

"Hey, no fair!" He said, trying to straighten out his robes as the wind died down and the others laughed at him.

Harry opened his eyes and puffed out a large lungful of air. Using his elemental skills often left him extremely tired, as it took a lot of effort to be able to control one element without it getting out of hand. He was progressing quickly, though, especially in learning to concentrate for long periods of time. He had found that his ability to concentrate had also helped him strengthen his wandless magic skills, as well improve his focus when duelling.

"You'll suffer for that, you bloody firebird!" Harry watched with wide eyes as Sheridan raced towards him with mock rage. The others laughed louder as he took a running leap at Harry, shouting "Pile on!" at the top of his voice.

Harry tried to duck out of the way as Sheridan leapt towards him, but the charging boy snagged his robes and he was pulled to the floor hard. Within seconds, the other boys had joined in the tussle, until all Kat and Leo could see was a chaotic mound of arms and legs with the warming sound of laughter accompanying it.

A desperate shout from the near the bottom of the pile called a halt to the game, and the boys slowly disentangled themselves leaving a

concerned Conway pushing himself away from Harry's unmoving form.

Sheridan laughed weakly and ran a hand through his dark hair. "I guess we were a bit too enthusiastic." He said to the other boys as they watched Kat, Conway and Leo kneel around the unconscious multianimagus.

"What happened?" Todd asked.

They watched as Conway gently lifted Harry's head, and pulled a small, flat rock out from underneath it. He glanced up at the others before throwing the cause of Harry's unconsciousness over his shoulder. "I guess his head isn't as hard as yours, Sheridan!" he said, and the others chuckled.

A groan from Harry caused the laughter to stop. "Sounds like he's coming around." Brogan said, squatting down just behind Conway so not to crowd the injured boy. "Think he'll be okay?"

Harry started to shake his head back and forth, his pupils moving quickly behind his closed eyelids as if he were dreaming. Kat watched as his hands clenched and relaxed a number of times before she looked up at Leo. "Something's wrong." She said.

Leo nodded, shuffling forward a bit closer as Harry mumbled something under his breath. "I think its another vision." He said, placing his hand against Harry's warm forehead.

"Vision?" Brandon asked.

"Voldemort's link to his scar." Kat reminded him, tapping one finger against her own forehead. "Most of the time he's okay, but sometimes the visions still get through."

"Poor guy." Brogan said.

"What do you think he's seeing?" Horus asked.

"I guess we won't find out until he wakes up." Leo replied. He glanced around at the circle of friends. "I suggest you all move back though, Pi's body doesn't take too kindly to these sorts of intrusions." The other boy's took the hint and moved away to a respectable distance to watch.

It wasn't long before Harry's eyes forced their way open, and his chest heaved a little before he rolled on his side and brought up his breakfast.

"Here." Sheridan passed Kat a flask of liquid for Harry to drink. She took the top off and went to help Harry take a sip before pulling it back and giving it a quick sniff. She sent a questioning look to Sheridan who shrugged. "It's all I could find." He said.

Kat sighed and helped Harry take a couple of sips whilst Leo supported his back. Once Harry came to his senses he jerked back from the flask Kat was holding, a look of distaste on his face. "What is that stuff?" he asked weakly.

"Only pumpkin juice." Sheridan assured him. "I guess it doesn't taste that great with half digested bacon sandwiches though."

Kat ignored the other boys as they made nauseating noises at Sheridan's comment, and she leaned forward to Harry. "Are you okay?" she asked.

Harry looked into her eyes for a moment before he nodded.

"What did you see?" Leo asked from his other side.

Harry took a deep breath to steady his voice before describing what he had seen. "There was the usual circle of Death Eaters around him, and he was explaining an attack plan. He's going to initiate an attack on Diagon Alley. I guess he's gotten tired of waiting for me to show up, and is now taking matters into his own hands."

"Attacking Diagon Alley? But that's one of the busiest areas of the Wizarding world." Todd said.

"That's why he's doing it." Harry replied in a low voice.

Silence fell over the group as they realised the implications of his words. "It's going to be a massacre." Brogan said quietly.

Harry started pushing himself up. "Where are you going?" Kat asked, reaching out a hand to steady the boy as he wavered on his feet.

"You think I'm just going to let him do this?" he asked. "Those people aren't going to know what's hit them. They'll be totally unprepared."

"So what are you going to do?" Leo asked. "Send someone another letter?"

Harry stood still for a second, but his mind continued to work at full speed. He shook his head. "There isn't time." He said. "Unless Dumbledore's got word about this before hand, which I doubt seeing he no longer has a spy, there is no way to protect the area before Voldemort arrives."

"So what can you do?" Horus asked.

Harry bit his lip as he thought through his options. He gave a nod as he came to a final decision and started across the grassy area to where the swords were still piled up.

"Pi? What are you doing?"

"I'm going to go there and help." He caked back over his shoulder.

The group looked at each other, before each one of them started to express their opinions of his decision. Harry held up a hand to silence the arguments being voiced at him. "It's the only way." He said. "Voldemort will be so shocked to see me that it might give someone a chance to notify the Ministry and the Order to get some support. I have some friends who have a shop on Diagon Alley, I'm pretty sure they would have some sort of direct contact with Dumbledore. It shouldn't take long for help to arrive."

Sheridan shook his head. "That sounds nuts." He said.

Todd agreed. "You can't do that alone."

"I guess that means we ought to go along as well to keep you out of trouble." Conway concluded.

Harry froze and looked at his friends. "You want to come?" he asked.

"Sure." Brandon replied with a smile. "We're at a combat school, right? So what's the point of learning anything if we don't get to use it?"

The others nodded in agreement, but Leo shook his head.

"You know I can't let you do this." He said.

"C'mon, Leo." Kat said, turning on her now familiar feminine charm. "You are always trying to remind us that there is more to this school than fighting. Now is our chance to apply what we've learnt to what is right."

Leo was silent for a few moments, and the boys and Kat held their breath as they awaited his answer.

After a few seconds Harry became fidgety, and he soon interrupted the silence to say "Well, I'm going before its too late. I can't let Voldemort kill so many innocent people."

As he moved towards the pile of weaponry once more, Leo shot a hand out and placed it on his shoulder. "Okay, we'll do this." He said.

"We?" Horus questioned.

Leo nodded once. "But we are going to do this my way." He said to the group. He turned to Harry. "You will not reveal yourself to the Dark Lord. He will stop at nothing to kill you, and you haven't got the skill nor the stamina to stand up to him for long. Do you understand me?"

Harry concurred uncertainly, not sure whether or not he would be able to keep his promise. "The rest of you will keep the hoods up on your battle robes at all times." Leo continued. "Don't let the Death Eaters know who you are. This school has remained a secret for centuries, and I'm not going to let you give away its secrets now."

The boys nodded, and started arranging their robes accordingly. They began to grin with excitement as Leo turned to Kat and Harry again. Kat began to open her mouth to protest about being left behind when Leo stopped her. "I wasn't even going to ask it." he assured her. "I was just going to tell you to be careful. Remember, you have nothing to prove to any of us." Kat smiled slightly at her surrogate father, and watched as he turned to Harry. "And no sudden gusts of wind or freak heat waves." He said with a wink. "I suggest you keep that a surprise until you know it will be of use to you."

Harry grinned back at him and nodded. "Thanks for this." He said, and Leo just waved him off.

"Kat's right." He said. "What is the point of learning to duel if you are never going to get the chance to use it for something that's right?" He turned to the rest of the boys. "Just you all be careful, and look out for one another." He said.

The boys all promised and Todd spoke up. "How are we going to get there?" he asked, and the others looked at him. "I mean, I've only been to Diagon Alley once when I was a kid, and its not like I can remember what it looks like."

Harry gave a short laugh. "Leave it to me." He said. He finished strapping his sword to his back and turned into his phoenix form. He rose into the air, hovering above the group as they stared up at him, and within a few minutes the surrounding environment faded away into a bright light.

Chapter 36: Attack on Diagon Alley

A few minutes later, Harry found himself sat on his heels in a side alley between Kat and Conway, watching from the shadows as people walked passed.

“This is amazing.” Kat said in wonder. Harry looked down at her and smiled. He had forgotten that this was the first time she had been anyway other than Marcello, and could only imagine the nervous excitement she would be feeling.

He looked down the street and grinned as he recognised a particularly eye-catching shop front. He took Kat’s hand in his own and pointed it out. “The two that work in there are Ron’s older brothers.” He said. “They left school last year to open that shop.”

“Weasley Wizarding Wheezes?” Conway asked. “What do they sell in there?”

Harry rolled his eyes. “What don’t they sell in there?” he asked. “Canary Creams, Skiving Snackboxes...” Conway stared blankly at him with one eyebrow raised. “It’s a joke shop.” Harry confirmed.

Immediately he felt a presence behind him as Sheridan looked over his shoulder. “That I have to see.” He said, once he spotted the brightly fronted shop.

“Hey, don’t go wandering off.” Brogan reminded him from further down the alley. “We’re only supposed to be waiting here for Leo and Brandon to get back.”

Just as he finished speaking, the bird-animagus flew into the alley and transformed, Leo strolling in not too far behind, his hood pulled firmly forward to cover his face.

“There seem to be a number of cloaked wizards congregating further down the street.” Brandon reported, pointing in the general direction.

Harry nodded. “Knockturn Alley.” He said, recognising the shadowing entrance. “No self-respecting witch or wizard would find themselves

down there. It's a perfect, if rather obvious place to launch an attack from."

"So what's the plan?" Horus asked, turning to Leo who was standing quietly behind him.

Leo looked at Harry. "You said that Dumbledore and his followers would be able to get here quickly?"

"I suspect Dumbledore will stay with the school." Harry admitted and pointed out the twin's shop. "But that shop is owned by two boys I went to Hogwarts with. I'm pretty sure they'd have some sort of direct contact with Dumbledore, he's too wise to not take up the possibility of having a couple of contacts keep an eye on such a public place."

" "Pretty" sure?"

Harry looked Leo in the eye. "I'd stake my life on it." he said, and Leo nodded.

"Very well." He said, and walked back into the shadows. "I want Kat, Pyro, and Conway to join me at the other end of the street. From there we can launch an attack in our animagus forms. Once you see us attack, I want the rest of you to start throwing spells from here. Do not get too deep into the fight, or too close. We are only here to cause a distraction until assistance arrives. As soon as it does, I'll call us together. We will all surround Pyro and we can get off home. No one will be the wiser."

"What if something happens to Pi?" Horus asked. "What's our backup?"

"Nothing will happen to me." Harry assured him, but Conway nodded at Horus' suggestion.

"Horus is right, we should have a support plan."

"I think they're going to make a move." Todd announced from his look-out post near the entrance to the lane.

Harry smiled slightly. "I guess we'll never find out." He said.

Leo just stared back at him before shaking his head. "Who is running this mission, you or me?" he asked. Harry shrugged, a small grin of anticipation on his face. Leo shook his head again. "Lets go," he said. "And just don't get hurt." He warned Harry, who nodded once and transformed into his panther form.

The motley group of four-legged mammals slunk out of the dark alleyway and blended through the shadows as until they had reached a short distance beyond the entrance to Knockturn Alley. There they found a sheltered spot to wait, and Harry crouched low next to Kat, his keen senses alert for any indication as to the oncoming attack.

After waiting a while, Harry felt something press against his side, and turned to find Kat rubbing her head in a comforting gesture against his shoulder. He gave a rumbling purr and quickly mimicked the action, reassuring the girl that he was okay, before turning back to watching the main street.

They didn't have to wait long, as the bright colours of various curses started to erupt from the entrance to the dark street. Leo gave a few guttural coughs as a signal to wait until the Death Eaters had made their way far enough into the main street for the counter-attack to be worthwhile.

Harry tensed his muscles, his eyes trying to recognise any of the shadowy figures that were shooting curses at the shoppers. He gave a quiet snarl in frustration when he realised that they all looked the same, and the thought briefly crossed his mind that Voldemort wasn't with them before Leo bared his teeth and pounced forward, racing towards the Death Eaters.

Harry took a number of bounding leaps after Leo, and chaos reigned as the three large felines and one wolf collided with the group of Dark Wizards. Harry aimed for one Death Eater on the edge of the group, sinking his claws fully into the man's shoulder and sending them both rolling to the floor. Harry was momentarily deafened by the scream of pain before he could regain his balance and twist away from the injured man.

He pounced again, this time rearing up on his hind legs to swipe one heavily armed paw across the white mask of another Death Eater, shattering it and causing the man to grip his face, blood seeping through his fingers.

Harry hesitated at the sight of blood, the images of Tocha's death still fresh in his mind. A female cry from his right caused his feline head to snap away from the sight, and he saw that Kat had transformed and was now struggling with a heavysset man who had his arms locked around her.

Harry let lose a snarl and raced towards the couple, dodging the curses that were being sent into the group by the other Marcello students. One Death Eater staggered in front of him, clutching his charred arm as he bent over in pain. Harry didn't hesitate, just took a larger stride and used the man's back as a springboard to launch his attack from.

He couldn't see Kat's face from under her hood, but he could feel her eyes on him as he sailed through the air towards them. He saw her pull herself to one side as he neared and her movement allowed him to connect full force with the man's chest, causing the Death Eater to lose his grip on his girlfriend, and sent them both falling backwards into window of Flourish and Blotts.

He lay amidst the shards of broken glass for a few moments, trying to get the sound of smashing glass out of his ears, before transforming and gently picking his way on his hands and knees out of the shop window. He took a brief glance down at the man he had attacked and saw the face of Goyle senior laying there. Harry shook his head slightly, pulled his cloak further forward to hide his face, and turned back to the battle that was going on in the street.

He could see that a number of the more competent wizards that had been shopping in Diagon Alley that afternoon were joining in, and Harry was thankful when he realised that they were only attacking the black-cloaked wizards, not the brownish uniform of the Marcello students.

He scanned the group again, looking for the now familiar form of Voldemort standing there. He frowned when he realised that his scar wasn't hurting in the same way as it had when he had been in Voldemort's presence at the beginning of summer and took this as a sure sign that the Dark Lord was not in the street.

He thought back to earlier that day when he had experienced a mood that was not his own. What he had interpreted as nervousness could have been a sense of anticipation, and Harry's eyes widened fearfully as he realised that he may have been tricked again, and that the real attack was occurring elsewhere.

His eyes darted around the scene, and came to rest on the image of Conway who was using his wand to battle a man with familiar silver hair. Harry recognised Malfoy, and realised that if Voldemort had been planning another attack elsewhere, then he would've probably kept his strongest followers with him. All this must just be to cause a general sense of alarm in the Wizarding world, and at the same time test the defences of Dumbledore and the Ministry.

He smiled slightly he saw the struggle going on before him, knowing that the Death Eaters certainly had something to report now. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed a flash of red, and turned to see the twins sneak out of their shop with their older brothers Bill and Charlie, their hands filled with small orange balls. Harry realised that this was probably the start of the Order's attack and shouted out Leo's name to alert him.

One of the brown-cloaked wizards turned to him and saw the advancing Weasleys. He nodded his covered head once before calling out the names of the other Marcello students. Almost instantly, they started making their way over to where Harry was still standing in front of Flourish and Blotts, defending themselves from the occasional curse, or using their swords against the Death Eaters who attempted a physical attack.

Harry stood where he was, keeping an eye on the Weasley brothers as they neared. He saw Fred look towards him, and was almost tempted to give a wave before he realised that the boy wouldn't

recognise him. He felt a presence next to his side, and turned to see Kat's dark eyes staring out from under her cloak.

"You'll see them soon." She said, and Harry nodded.

He took one last look over the shoulders of his new friends as they formed a circle around him to see other members of the Order arriving and many of the Death Eaters apparating away. He smiled as the Weasley brothers threw a small number of the orange balls into the crowd of remaining Death Eaters. Upon impact, the balls had erupted with an odourless orange cloud that caused the Death Eaters to start coughing and swiping at their eyes. With this added distraction, Harry transformed into a phoenix, his change hidden by his Marcello friends, and with a short burst of song and a flash of light he transported them back to the school.

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The evening meal that night at Hogwarts was a tense one. The sudden disappearance of all the Hogwarts teachers in the middle of lunch had announced that Voldemort had become active, and rumours soon started to spread about the attack on Diagon Alley. Many of the students were nervously awaiting any news of their families or friends who worked in the street, and the rest were equally anxious about the attack in general.

The Gryffindor table was noticeably quieter than their usual selves. Hermione glanced across the table at Ginny, who was pushing her food around her plate and even Ron seemed to be eating less than normal. She sighed and pushed her own plate away, her appetite gone, just as the doors opened to reveal Tonks and Shacklebolt standing there in full Auror battle robes.

Upon their arrival, Dumbledore stood at the head table and attracted the attention of the students before making an announcement. "If you have all finished your meals then I suggest that you return straight to your common rooms. As soon as I have heard more about the situation I will send your Head of Houses up to you with any news." As he spoke his eyes met briefly with Hermione's. She gave a nod back, knowing that his acknowledgement meant that she and Ron

were invited to the meeting and stood with the other students as they were dismissed. As they entered the large entrance hall, she took hold of Ron's elbow and directed him away from the crowd.

"Where are we going?" he asked, slightly bewildered by her actions. "Dumbledore said McGonagall would come up and tell us what's going on."

"But you get the benefit of first hand information, dear brother of ours." Ron and Hermione looked further up the corridor to see Fred leaning casually against the wall with his twin brother standing next to him, their cloaks and faces covered by a fine orange dust.

Ron raised an eyebrow at their appearance. "What happened to you two?" he asked.

George clutched his chest in mock hurt. "Oh don't worry about us..."

"...We're fine." Fred continued. "Thanks for asking."

Hermione smiled with relief at their antics, taking their larking around to indicate that nothing serious had happened at the attack. "I think he was referring to your orange appearance." She pointed out.

George and Fred looked at each other, "Well, that's kinda our own fault." George admitted. "The dust in our new smoke bombs didn't really disperse as we would've liked..."

"...but you'll find out more in Dumbledore's office." Fred continued. "Which we had better get to if we don't want to miss anything."

"I doubt we will, Fred." George said to his brother as they walked down the corridor. "We are the key witnesses after all."

"Is everyone okay?" Hermione asked.

Fred and George nodded. "Everyone's fine." Fred assured her, and his sudden seriousness startled the girl.

“There were a few minor injuries.” George continued in an equally serious tone. “And damage to the actual street was minimal.”

“So why couldn’t Tonks and Shacklebolt just announce that in the hall?” Ron asked. “Everyone is on tenterhooks down there.”

Fred glanced at George as they walked up to the gargoyle outside Dumbledore’s office. “Because there are some issues that need discussing first.” George said. “Namely a group of mysterious fighters that distracted the Death Eaters until the Order could get there.”

“Who were they?” Hermione asked.

“We don’t know.” Fred admitted. “That’s what this Order meeting is about.”

The four of them stepped off the moving staircase and walked through the open door of Dumbledore’s office, taking the four empty seats nearest them.

Dumbledore stood up as they entered, and started the meeting. “I am relieved to announce that there were no fatalities in the attack on Diagon Alley.” He said. “However, a number of Death Eaters were inflicted with serious sword wounds, and are now being treated in a secure ward at St Mungo’s.”

Ron looked at Hermione and mouthed “swords?” at her with a questioning look on his face. Hermione shrugged and looked at the twins who were sitting next on her other side. They just gave her a look to wait and turned their attention back to the headmaster.

“I think it was only by pure luck we were able to limit the damage inflicted by this attack.” Dumbledore continued. “But I think we should hear more about this from first-hand witnesses.” He turned to the twins. “Mister and Mister Weasley?”

Fred and George stood up as one, and explained the events as they had seen them from the shop window.

"Our new shop is located not far from the entrance to Knockturn Alley..." Fred started.

"...We had noticed an unusual amount of activity from wizards going in and out of there all day..."

"...So we decided to keep a close eye on it."

"It was around lunchtime when the attack started, and as soon as it did I triggered the signal to let you all know about it."

"Whilst George had gone out back to give the signal, I stayed by the window to watch the attack, and at the same time started preparing some defences we could use against them. The attack had barely started when the Death Eaters were attacked by a group of animals..."

"From one of the stores?" Remus interrupted.

Fred shook his head. "No, it looked more like half the zoo had escaped." He said.

"They were animagi." George explained. "I saw a number of them transform when I came back to the shop window."

"They were using swords as well as magic against the Death Eaters..."

"...And there were two groups of them, attacking from different ends of the street."

"They didn't stick around long though." Fred said. "As soon as Bill and Charlie arrived at the shop we went out with the smoke bombs, and they all grouped together and disappeared."

"A port-key?" Dumbledore asked.

All of those that had been there on the street by that time shook their head. "If it was then it was not like one I've ever seen before." Shacklebolt said. "They seemed to disappear in a flash of light."

"But it just seemed really strange." Bill said. "I mean, they had been fighting well up to that point, then just to disappear? Why would they do that?"

"Did you see who it was?" Dumbledore asked.

The others shook their heads. "They all had their hoods up." George explained.

"Almost as if they didn't want to be recognised." Fred continued.

"Well that would explain their sudden disappearance." Snape said with his usual sneer.

"What animagi forms did they have?" Hermione asked, ignoring her potions master and pulling a sheet of parchment and a quill. "I can look it up on the animagus register."

"If they were attempting to keep their identities secret, then I doubt they would let themselves be so easily identifiable." Snape said coolly.

"It wouldn't hurt to try." Dumbledore said. "Sometimes the most of simple of methods can prove to be the most productive." He looked to the twins.

"Mostly large cats." Fred said, directing his answers to Hermione as she scribbled down their descriptions. "A leopard, a smaller cat with white fur and spots, and a big black one..."

"There was also a wolf." George added, "though he was one of the first to transform back."

"How many were there in all?" Remus asked.

Fred and George looked at each other, communicating in a way that only twins can to add up the number of fighters they had seen.

"Well, if we take the all the wizards that were dressed in brown..." George said

“...As all the Death Eaters were in black, and the shoppers who got involved were wearing allsorts...” Fred continued.

“...Then we’d say we saw about eight or nine, give or take a few.”

They looked to Shackbolt and Tonks who nodded in agreement. “Sounds about right to me,” Tonks replied. “I wasn’t really there long enough for a proper count though.”

“How much damage was done to the properties?” McGonagall asked.

Fred answered. “Not much, most were just hit by the occasional curse...”

“...Apart from Flourish and Blotts.” George continued. “One of the mysterious strangers decided to send Goyle through the window...”

“...Though that was probably the worst of the damage...”

“If you don’t count the orange powder that covered everything in the immediate vicinity.” Bill reminded them, as he and Charlie were also covered in the bright orange powder emitted by the twins’ latest invention.

The twins’ faces lit up again in their usual mischievous grins. “And what better advertisement could you get?” George asked. “No one will forget our shop for a while.”

“Oh joy!” Snape said under his breath.

Dumbledore sent him a warning glance. “Is there anything else anyone would like to add?” he asked, and when the room remained silent he continued. “Well, I propose that Ms Granger join you sometime this afternoon, Minerva, to look up the animagus records to see if we can’t shed any light on our mysterious allies. I also suspect many of us need to return to the Ministry to sort out what to do with the Death Eaters caught today...” he looked at Shackbolt and Tonks who both nodded. “In which case, there is only the usual

business to end this meeting with.” He turned his attention to the rest of the group. “Is there still no news of our missing friend?”

The group looked around at each other, but all remained silent. “Alas,” Dumbledore said with a weary sigh. “that is what I feared.” He looked at Ron and Hermione. “It seems your letter from over a month ago is still our last point of contact with Mister Potter.”

Hermione and Ron shared a glance. “And it didn’t tell us diddly-squat” Ron said in a low tone. “I still can’t believe he would come into my room and not even tell anyone he was here.”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “We’ve been through this so many times, Ron.” She said. “It was a probably a dream. The owl most likely woke you up as it delivered the letter or something!”

Ron still looked dubious, but remained silent as Dumbledore began to speak again. “Well, if he was here and didn’t contact us, then he obviously has his reasons.” He sighed an old man’s sigh again and nodded his head. “I wish you all a good day.” He said to the group. “Stay safe.” And stood up from the table to make his way into his private chambers at the back of his office.

The Order sat in silence for a while longer, musing over the saddened look that had crossed the headmaster’s face as he spoke, before starting to get to their feet and making their way to the door.

Ron and Hermione followed their Head of House out of the office and down the stairs to the gargoyle. “You think he really came and left that letter without talking to us?” Hermione asked Ron quietly as they let McGonagall walk on in front. “I suppose there was an awful lot of information in there that he would only have known if he had been here...”

Ron stayed silent for another corridor. “I don’t know if I’d ever forgive him if I found out he had been here that night.” He finally said.

Hermione looked at her boyfriend with shock in her eyes. “Ron...?”

He shook his head. "No, Hermione. We've spent most of the summer and all of this term worrying about him. Anything could've happened to him in that time. I can understand if he wants to stay away for a while. I could possibly even forgive him for not contacting us as much as we'd like, if only because he probably doesn't realise how much we worry about him. But, to come here and hand-deliver a note without having the guts to talk to us...?" he shook his head. "Makes me think that Malfoy was right. Harry has lost the guts to face us after what happened and is running away from everyone. If that is the case, then he doesn't deserve to be worried about."

Hermione shook her head. "But that's not the Harry we know..." she started, but Ron interrupted.

"Then lets just hope he proves me otherwise." He said coldly. "And soon."

* * * * *

Chapter 37: Christmas Day.

Ron awoke slowly to find the morning sun crawling weakly across the dark carpet of the living room at Grimmauld place. The fire was still glowing warmly in the hearth and the candles on the tree in the corner were still twinkling from the charms that had been put on them the day before, though the empty space below its branches was now taken up with a pile of brightly wrapped presents.

He felt a slight movement beside him and looked down with a smile to see Hermione look up at him, her head resting comfortably on his chest and his arm wrapped protectively around her.

"Merry Christmas" he whispered gently as she smiled at him contentedly.

"Merry Christmas, Ron." Hermione replied, pushing herself up to stretch slightly. Ron quickly reached out to catch the blanket that had been covering them before it hit the floor, but missed and couldn't reach it with his girlfriend leaning against him. Hermione leaned over his lap, supporting herself with one hand on his stomach as she pulled the blanket up and looked at it. "Did you parents leave us here all night?" she asked.

Ron nodded and pointed to the tree. "They even managed to deliver the presents without waking us." He said with a smile, and Hermione laughed slightly, looking around the empty room. "I'm surprised we haven't been woken up by the others yet..." he said with a smile, but his voice trailed off when Hermione's laughter died. "What's wrong?" he asked.

"Who's that?" she asked, pointing to the window over his shoulder.

Ron sat up a little and twisted around to find himself blinded by the winter sun as it shone through the window. He squinted and raised a hand to shadow his eyes and saw the silhouette of a bird standing on the inside window ledge, its plumage glowing unnaturally bright in the sunlight.

The bird opened its wings and bent its legs slightly before taking off and floating effortlessly across the room with a box clutched in its talons, landing softly on the arm of a chair next to the sofa on which Ron and Hermione were sat. Their eyes widened when they realised that the unnatural glow from the bird was due to it being a phoenix, and the magnificent fire-bird trilled slightly as it looked down at the package at its feet, and then back up to the two Gryffindors, patiently waiting for one of them to come and claim it.

“That isn’t Fawkes, is it?” It was more of statement than a question, but Ron answered anyway.

“No. Fawkes is a lot redder. This one is a lot more golden...”

“With a touch of black, just like your feather.” Hermione couldn’t tear her eyes away from the magnificent bird and so felt rather than saw Ron nod next to her. “Do you think it’s the one that sent us the messages from Harry?”

“Maybe.” Ron said and pushed himself slowly off the seat, moving slowly towards the phoenix so that he wouldn’t startle it. The phoenix returned Ron’s gaze calmly, and didn’t seem the least bit worried about the Weasley boy’s advances.

Ron gently knelt by the chair the phoenix was perched on and slowly reached out for the package, wary of any attack that the phoenix may have for him. The bird trilled again, softer this time, and Ron felt himself relax as he took the package and knelt back onto his heels.

“Maybe we should wait until Moody or your father get here.” Hermione said nervously. “It could be cursed or something.”

Ron shook his head. “It’s addressed to us.” He said and smiled slightly. “And I’d place any bet that it’s Harry’s handwriting.”

The phoenix trilled again and opened its wings slightly, cocking its head on one side as it sang. Ron stared at the bird for a second before nodding thoughtfully. “I think he recognised Harry’s name. And I think he’s trying to say that I’m right.” He said to Hermione.

"I don't know," Hermione said slowly. "I still don't trust it. I mean, we haven't heard from Harry since that note on your bedside table. It's been nearly two months, so why now?"

"Because it's Christmas?" Ron suggested. He took the package and went over to sit on the floor in front of Hermione. "Look, there's a letter attached to the outside. We'll see what it has to say and then decide on whether we should wait for Moody or not."

Hermione nodded, making it clear that she still wasn't impressed with the idea. But as Ron peeled the envelope away from the package and pulled out the parchment from inside it, he couldn't help but notice that she had scooted a little closer to read the letter over his shoulder.

Dear Ron and Hermione, Merry Christmas! I'm glad you are both safe and well, and can't wait to see you both again. I hope your parents took me up on the offer to use my Gringotts vault to rebuild the Burrow, Ron, I can only imagine how depressing Sirius' old place can get over the holidays. I hope the new place will be built by next summer when I can come and visit.

Congratulations on getting together! I have my spies everywhere, you see, and all I can say is that it took you long enough! You two make a great couple! Well done on your successes on the Quidditch pitch as well, Ron. I'm pretty certain you've done wonders with that team, and not surprising really. I don't know of anyone who lives and breathes Quidditch half as much as you do. I don't know if I'll get the chance to play again when I get back, but I'll definitely be there to support you if I can't. And I hope that you both stick on with the DA, I'm sure we all realise how much we need the extra practise with what is likely to happen over the next couple of years. I'll probably get together with you when I return, teach you a few tricks that I've picked up from around here.

As for my return, it shouldn't be too long now. I think I've pretty much learnt all that I am going to here and am beginning to feel that I've stayed away for far too long. Please let everyone know that I'm safe, and that I'm looking forward to seeing them again. I might even be

bringing a friend or two with me. I've probably changed a lot since you last saw me, but hopefully for the better. I've pushed myself hard over the past couple of months and have realised a lot of things about myself, not least that I used to have a horrid temper! I've sorted it all out now, and I'm sorry for yelling at you guys last year. I just hope you realise that I only lashed out at you because you were my closest friends, and even though I've been gone a long time, I hope that doesn't change anything between us.

In the box you will find four presents and they should be labelled. Yours are a bit crude I'm afraid, but I made them myself and they were my first attempts. Just promise me that you'll wear them until I return? Think of them as a good luck charm! Maybe even as a homing beacon of sorts so that I can find my way back to Hogwarts safely! The third present is for Remus. Tell him that he may not understand what it is now, but to keep it safe until I come back and can explain its purpose better. And the final one is for Dumbledore; I think he'll understand.

Oh, the courier, by the way, is a friend of mine. You could say that we've formed a close attachment over the past few months. His name is Pyro. Introduce him to Dumbledore if he pops in, for I'm sure he'll be interested in finding another phoenix to befriend Fawkes. Pyro should hang round for most of the morning, so feel free to write a return letter if you get the time. I'd love to hear how you all are and what you have all been up to. He'll have to be home before nightfall though. Sounds childish I know, but there are a few rules to abide by here and he'd be noticed if he were missing.

Well, that's about it for now. I promise I'll explain more about where I've been and what I've been doing when I see you next, and as I said before, that should be real soon! I miss you both more than you can imagine, and I wish that you were here with me more than anything. Take care, both of you, and have a great day! Harry

Ron looked up at Hermione once he had finished reading. "Well..." he said, but wasn't sure how to continue,

"Well" Hermione repeated the word as if she were agreeing with him.

“At least he’s still alive.” Ron said coldly. There was a low whistle from the phoenix as it ruffled its feathers slightly. “And I bet you are enjoying this, as well.” Ron directed to the bird. “Knowing where Harry is and not telling us! Do you have any idea how worried we’ve been?”

The phoenix hung its head slightly as if it was feeling ashamed and Hermione put her hand on Ron’s shoulder. “Settle down, Ron,” she said softly. “It’s just a bird. It’s not his fault.” If anything the phoenix looked even guiltier and its head dropped even lower as it started to sing a mournful tune. “See, you’ve upset him now.”

Ron nodded. “Sorry, Pyro.” He muttered, then shook his head and laughed. “See what you are doing to me Harry, old chap?” he said to the piece of parchment in his hand. “You’ve got me talking to birds.”

“And if you listen carefully, they sometimes talk back.” A familiar voice from the doorway said.

The phoenix gave a small trill of recognition and flew excitedly over to Dumbledore’s shoulder. “Hello” the headmaster said to the firebird with a smile. “I don’t believe we’ve met?”

“His name’s Pyro.” Hermione said. “And he came with a letter and parcel from Harry.”

Dumbledore’s attention was quickly diverted from the phoenix on his shoulder to the parchment in Ron’s hand. “What does the letter say?” he asked calmly, though both students could sense the desperate desire in the old man’s eyes to hear that Harry was safe.

“He doesn’t say that much, really” Ron answered, holding out the letter to the headmaster. “He comes across at being quite content where he is, wherever that is, but still says he misses us.”

“And you doubt his sincerity?” Dumbledore asked, quickly reading through the letter through his half-moon glasses.

“Well, if he really missed us, then don’t you think he would’ve contacted us sooner?” Ron spoke becoming angry. “A letter? Or a... a visit? Something to tell us he was safe?”

“Ron!” Hermione was shocked at her boyfriend’s words. She knew that the Weasley was still upset over Harry’s disappearance, but he had seemed so happy when they had first seen the parcel Pyro had been carrying.

“It’s been two months since he last contacted us, Hermione! Two! And everything he wrote in that letter indicated that he had been in Hogwarts without making the effort to talk to us. Even if he hadn’t been in Hogwarts that day, then all he had to do was borrow a phoenix feather and we could’ve had regular contact by now.”

“But the letter says that he has had to live by rules.” Hermione argued back. “Maybe he wasn’t able to contact us often. Maybe he was allowed a special treat because it was Christmas!”

“Then how do you explain how he knows what’s been going on here?” Ron asked. “It’s almost as if he’s been in regular contact with someone at Hogwarts! Why couldn’t he have passed a message on with them?”

Hermione looked lost for words and shook her head slightly. “You’ve presumed once before that Harry had it easy, Ron.” She started, quieter this time. “And you saw then how wrong you were. You nearly lost your friendship over it. Please don’t do it again?”

Ron stared at her stonily, but didn’t retort back. “Maybe he needed some space.” Hermione continued. “He’d been captured by Voldemort, and tortured as well. You know how Harry is; he hates pity. And that’s all he would have had if he had returned at the start of the new school year. Maybe he didn’t want to be found, and he’s been away all this time to sort himself out, just like the letter says.”

“Maybe you should see the presents he has made for you.” Dumbledore suggested quietly, gently stroking the breast of the subdued phoenix on his shoulder. “The letter suggests that he has

made them himself. Maybe you could judge just how much he has missed you on the amount of effort he has put into them?"

The phoenix on his shoulder gave a low whistle and Hermione opened the parcel to pull out two small boxes, one of which she passed over to Ron. They were both wrapped in plain brown paper and string, and the small boxes they contained were made of folded card. Hermione placed the paper and string on the seat beside her, and carefully opened the box, letting out a gasp when she saw what was inside. Ron's eyes also opened wide when he opened his own box and saw its contents.

"Oh, my!" Hermione said and gently pulled out a silver chain and pendant. The pendant was of a silver phoenix, the details of the feathers and facial features delicately defined. Clutched in its claws was a small stone that seemed to swirl with a shimmering red substance. Ron pulled out a similar pendant, but instead of a silver chain his was placed on a black cord. Pyro let out a questioning trill to which Hermione gasped, "It's beautiful!"

"What kind of stone is that?" Ron asked, holding his pendant up to the window to see the light of the sun glowing through it.

"I have never seen anything like it." Hermione said, mimicking the Weasley's actions. "Its almost as if it's colours are constantly changing from silver to red."

"May I?" Dumbledore asked, and Hermione willingly handed over her pendant whilst Ron continued to examine his own. After a brief examination Dumbledore shook his head in defeat. "I assume that it some sort of liquid set in the stone." He said, handing the necklace carefully back to Hermione. "That would explain its shifting colours. Though what liquid it is, I am not sure."

"But surely the only liquid that can be that deep a red is blood?" Hermione said, looking at her necklace again.

The phoenix on Dumbledore's shoulder gave a low whistle, and opened his wings slightly, just like it had earlier when Ron had mentioned Harry's name. The headmaster stared intently at the bird,

then raised an eyebrow. "In which case, I believe that Mister Weasley here owes Harry an apology." He said. "Something of such beauty, and with a trace of something as personal as blood must surely mean something to his perception of your friendship?"

Ron nodded meekly. "I just miss him." He muttered and looked up in shock as the phoenix glided silently across the room and settled heavily on his shoulder. Ron smiled slightly as he felt the warmth of the bird's feathers permeate his neck and cheek.

"We all do." The headmaster said, taking a seat on the arm of the sofa.

"But surely that doesn't explain why it shimmers the way it does." Hermione said.

"I suspect that Harry has charmed them in some way." Dumbledore said, rereading the letter quickly. "He seems to be adamant that you wear them, though I feel they may contain a little more than just good luck! Maybe you two could make a project out of it? And let me know of anything you find?"

Hermione nodded. "Of course!" she said with a smile and moved onto the floor and held up her hair so that Ron could clasp the necklace around her neck, rolling his eyes at her enthusiasm for extra time in the library.

"Oh, and here's your present, sir." Ron said, pulling out the appropriate gift from the parcel and handing it over.

Dumbledore smiled slightly and gently tore open the package, looking at its contents with a small frown before his face broke out in a wide grin. "Socks!" he exclaimed, revealing a couple of pairs of blue cotton socks. His grin grew wider as the two Gryffindors sitting on the floor looked at each other uneasily.

"Um, sir?" Ron asked hesitantly. "What is so funny about a pair of socks?"

If possible, Dumbledore's smile widened even more, and the students were surprised to see his eyes filled with tears. "Nothing's funny at all." Dumbledore said. "It just relates back to something that I told Harry back in his first year, and in this context I shall take it as a sign of his forgiveness; I really am only an old man who can make mistakes just like anyone else." His smile faded slightly and a thoughtful expression crossed his face. "And maybe I should take this as a hint that I should get a new pair of slippers to go with them!"

Ron looked questioningly at Hermione who shrugged slightly, before she looked up at the ceiling to hear various shouts of excitement as the rest of the Weasley's woke up.

"Will you join us for Christmas, sir?" Hermione asked politely as something went crash on the floor above, and Bill's voice could be heard shouting at the twins.

"I would be glad to." Dumbledore said, still examining his socks. "I believe we should be expecting some more guests throughout the course of the morning as well." He added, settling comfortably in an armchair by the fire. "I believe Professor Lupin should be over some time soon, though all the teachers will have to return to Hogwarts for lunch."

Ron and Hermione nodded and watched as Pyro gave a small trill and glided back over to Dumbledore, settling contentedly on the back of the thick chair and happily shuffling his feathers to get comfortable.

Moments later, the door burst open to reveal Fred and George still dressed in their matching pyjamas rush in like excited school-children. As soon as they saw the headmaster, however, their demeanour changed to one of adult seriousness, and they straightened their backs and sat calmly on the sofa behind Ron and Hermione before exchanging greetings.

Dumbledore chuckled slightly as their eyes kept glancing at the pile under the tree, and eventually he spoke. "Ignore me." He said. "Though I am sure this is the first time you two have ever felt the need to be anything other than yourselves!"

George's face broke into a grin as Fred leapt to the tree, sorting through presents and passing them to their respective owners. "Sorry, sir" he said. "I guess we're finally beginning to feel the need to grow up." He added as he was handed a large box.

Dumbledore crinkled his nose slightly and shook his head. "I'd rather you didn't," he said. "The thought of you two acting any more mature than you already do scares me."

"Sir?" Fred asked from underneath the tree.

"Well, who else would be able to provide me with appropriate passwords for my office if you two no longer do?" he explained. "I fear that security at Hogwarts would no longer be what it was!"

The four Gryffindor's laughed, and the door opened again to reveal Ginny standing there in her dressing gown. "No fair!" she exclaimed loudly, rushing into the room when she saw various piles of paper. "You could've waited for me..." she broke off as soon as she saw Dumbledore sitting there calmly. "Merry Christmas, sir." She said in a quieter voice.

Dumbledore just chuckled again and stood to greet Molly and Arthur Weasley and their two eldest sons as they entered the door.

By mid-morning, Remus Lupin had turned up with a small number of presents for the group, and Hermione and Ron introduced him to Pyro after handing him his gift.

Remus looked at the phoenix intently, frowning as he examined the bird that seemed to fidget nervously under his gaze. "And you say he came from Harry?" he asked again.

Ron and Hermione glanced at each other before they both nodded. Remus glanced down at the box in his hands, then back up at the firebird. "Hmmm," he breathed thoughtfully, and started to carefully unwrap the parcel.

"What is it, sir?" Hermione asked.

Remus shrugged. "Just a feeling I guess." He said, glancing up at the bird again before turning his attention to his gift.

As he pulled away the last layers a fist-sized stone and a slip of paper fell out of the box into his lap. He picked up the stone and held it up to the light, watching the red and silver shimmer and swirl.

"It's the same as our stones." Hermione said, showing him her pendant. "But much larger."

Remus looked at the phoenix again thoughtfully and the bird gave a small trill. He jumped with a small cry as the stone in his hand grew warm to the touch, and the stone fell to the floor.

"What happened?" Hermione asked nervously as the Defence Professor rubbed his sore hand.

Remus stared at the firebird as it gave another trill, though whereas his first had been questioning, the second had a definite tone of happiness to it. "I really don't know." He said.

"Is this the gift from Harry?" Dumbledore asked, coming over and picking the stone up off the floor to examine it.

Remus nodded and picked up the short note that had been in the box with the jewel.

Remus, this is just a short note to say that you should keep this stone safe until I return home. I've been doing a lot of research since I've been away, and believe that this stone will be able to give you something that you've wanted for a long time. You're my last link to my parents, Remus, and I would do anything to keep you from meeting the same fate as them and Sirius. Take this gift, and I will explain more when I see you next. Stay safe. Harry.

Remus stared thoughtfully, and gingerly took the stone as Dumbledore offered it to him. He held it carefully in his hand, anticipating the sudden burst of warmth to go through it like it had before. When nothing had happened after a few moments, he looked

up at the firebird who had his head cocked slightly to one side and a look of humour in its expression as it gazed at the werewolf.

“Is he speaking in riddles again?” Ron interrupted the staring contest and indicating the note that Remus still held in his other hand.

Remus smiled and nodded, tearing his attention away from the hypnotic gaze of the phoenix. “I guess a lot of the questions that he is providing us with shall have to wait until he returns home.” He said and sent one last questioning glance towards the firebird sitting on the chair.

Any further conversation was interrupted by Molly Weasley as she shouted a warning at her twin sons for playing with one of their smoke bombs. As Remus looked up, he saw Fred stumble slightly and the snitch-sized ball fall at his mother’s feet, covering the room in bright orange powder.

Remus shook his head as he quickly exited the room behind Dumbledore and the gliding phoenix, shaking off the small layer of dust that had got on his robes; some things never changed.

Chapter 38: The Doyen's death

Harry felt unfathomably happy as he swooped over the forest that led up to Marcello School. He had spent the day watching his friends enjoying Christmas, and now couldn't wait to spend the evening with Kat in her quarters. He sighed as he flew lower in the disappearing light. It seemed like nothing could get better than this until he could take Kat back with him to Hogwarts, and finally combine his two worlds together.

As he neared the front entrance of the school, he closed his eyes and transformed from his phoenix form into a falcon, falling a couple of feet through the air as the transformation took place. Only the group he trained with knew his ability to change into a phoenix, and they had been helping him research his phoenix abilities in the evenings after their own training had finished for the day. Until he was ready to face Voldemort the group had agreed to keep all his abilities secret, so that he could have the upper hand when he surprised the Dark Lord with his newfound gifts.

His weekly routine was a happy one now that he no longer had to face Orson everyday. He would get up whilst it was still dark and run around the lake a couple of times before starting on some solo sword and wandless magic work. Leo would turn up about midmorning and help him perfect his balance and positioning with the blade. His Dance was feeling more complete after hours of training, though Harry still wasn't able to perform its conclusion as well as he had when he had been injured and used the Doyen's sword.

After a short rest for lunch the Doyen would appear, often leaning heavily on a staff, and direct Harry in how to use the elementals. Training as an elemental had started off with a small sample of each; a candle, a small bowl of water and a small plate of earth. The air elemental had been the exception, as it was the hardest element to contain. The Doyen admitted that this had been one of the reasons why he had been loathed to learn how to control it, for it was not possible to contain the damage should the air element get out of control.

Harry, however, hadn't had too much trouble with the air element. He supposed this had been due to all time he had spent swooping over the Quidditch pitch on his broom, and was now able to control a small whirlwind and direct it around the glade before becoming too tired to continue.

His most powerful element, however, was just as Leo had predicted; fire. He had been finding it hard to manipulate the earth and water elements, but he was already able to perform amazing feats with the burning hot balls of flames and it didn't tire him out like the other elementals. The only problem he had found was that he needed fire to already be present before he could manipulate it as he was unable to conjure up a flame himself.

The Doyen had assured him that elementals were never supposed to be able to create the elements, only to control them, and that any magically produced elements would not respond to the elementals' manipulation in the same way.

Harry stopped his musings as he flew and turned his attention to the dark silhouette of a figure standing in front of the school's doors, a long cloak wrapped firmly around their body to keep the icy wind out. As he neared he recognised the slim figure of his girlfriend and gave a small cry as he landed and transformed in front of her.

"Why are you waiting out here in the cold?" he asked, stepping forward and taking the girl in his arms, placing a quick welcoming kiss on her lips. He pulled away when she didn't respond and his happiness faded as he saw the look in her eye.

"What is it?" he asked. "What's happened? Is it one of the others?"

Kat shook her head. "Leo asked me to come wait for you." she said, and unwrapped one hand from her cloak to take hold of Harry's arm. "He wants me to take you to see the Doyen."

"Why?" Harry asked as he was led into the building. "Why would he want to see me?"

Kat just shook her head and remained silent, wrapping her arm instinctively around Harry's waist as they walked down a corridor he didn't recognise.

After a few minutes of silent walking, Harry saw Horus leaning against the bare walls up ahead, next to a closed oak door.

"He's been asking for you." he said, pushing himself upright and closing the distance between them.

"What's going on?" Harry asked in confusion.

The door Horus had been leaning next to opened and Leo stepped out, turning to quietly close the door behind him.

"He's resting for the moment." He explained. "We can go into the study for a while until he wakes."

"Is something wrong with him?" Harry asked, following the Master into a dark but homely looking study.

"He's old." Leo said with a sigh after he had settled himself in a soft leather armchair. "He told you that when you first met."

Harry froze at the man's softly spoken words, his mind not comprehending what he was saying. "You mean... he's dying?"

Leo nodded and started rubbing at an old scar that ran across the back of one of his hands. "It seems strange." He thought out loud, breaking the silence. "He's been here ever since I started out, almost twenty years ago now. And I expected him to be here long after I'd gone." Silence fell over the four of them again. "I suppose you could say he was almost like a father-figure to me for all those years." Leo added sadly.

Harry looked up at the saddened man. He had spent a lot of time with the Doyen over the past month and had found him to be a strict but encouraging tutor, but he had seen the close relationship between the Doyen and the Master, even though there was well over a century between their ages.

“What does he want to see me about?” Harry asked.

Leo shrugged. “He didn’t really say.” He said. “Though I suspect that it might have something to do with your elemental abilities...” he broke off as if he had thought of something, but shook his head before speaking further.

He placed his hands on his knees and pushed himself up. “Maybe you can come with me now and see him. He only seems to be drifting off for a few minutes at a time.”

Harry gave a nod and stood up, hesitating as he saw Horus and Kat had remained sitting.

“We won’t be going in with you.” Horus said. “He said he wanted to speak with you alone.”

Kat stood and went over to Harry, giving him a quick hug and a kiss on his cheek. “Be strong for him.” She said. “And we’ll be here when you come out.”

Harry nodded slightly and followed Leo across the corridor and silently entered the Doyen’s bedroom.

The room was full of rich colours set against a pale wall with dark wood furniture and a large panoramic window bordered with thick, burgundy curtains. Once Harry had given the rest of the room a quick examination, his attention fell on the large four-poster bed in its centre. He gave a small gasp as he realised the size of the pillows seemed to dwarf the pale old man propped up against them and his small frame was lost in the blankets that covered him.

Leo made his way across the room to the side of the bed nearest where the old man lay. Harry hesitantly followed and held his breath, anticipating the fact that the old man had passed away before he had arrived.

“I have a few more days in me left, boy.”

Harry started as the wavering tone of the old man broke the silence, and forced himself to take a couple of steps closer to the bed until he was standing next to Leo.

“Take a seat.” The Doyen said. “I have a fair amount to say to you before you leave.”

Harry felt Leo’s hand on his shoulder and pulled the chair that the Master had indicated nearer the bedside. He watched as Leo gave him a quick smile and walked back out the room, leaving Harry nervously watching each rasping breath the old man took. He had never seen anyone so close to death before; everyone he had ever known had either been full of life, or had died suddenly. Harry felt overwhelmed by the situation until the old man began to speak again, his words becoming stronger as he talked.

“I have been on this earth a long time, and am proud to say that there are only a few moments I regret.” He took a small breath before continuing. “One of those moments was when I released the power of the elements within you. It is unheard of to expect one as young as yourself to be able to harbour such power, but I am glad to say that you have managed admirably and I have no doubts you will continue to develop your skills under Leo’s guidance.

“But there are a few thing that I must warn you about. Especially in accordance with your prophesised battle against Voldemort.”

The Doyen fell silent, and Harry watched as the old man’s eyelids closed over their colourless orbs. Harry shifted in his seat, worried that the man had fallen asleep mid-conversation with him, but the noise of his cloak against the fabric of the chair caused the man to start awake again and continue as if he had never stopped talking.

“I have constantly told you through your training that the elements are not to be taken lightly, that a great concentration and strength is needed to control them. Recently, you have been able to control two elements in small amounts, no?”

“Yes, sir” Harry replied.

“Well, I must warn you of unleashing the power greater than that, however tempting it may be.” The Doyen said. “The reason why there are not many elementals left is because they often forget that the elements need to be treated with a due respect, and try and control too much too soon.” He sighed at the mental image that passed through his mind. “The Master that taught me about the elementals forgot about that respect, and his final lesson to me was one that I have remembered all my life.

“He was showing some Lords of our time his abilities, in the hope that they would provide the funds for some facilities to identify and train more potential elementals. His enthusiasm and desire to impress got the better of him and he attempted to control three elements at a large intensity, as opposed to the two he already knew he was capable of.”

“Air.” Harry said under his breath, realising now why the old man was so wary of that particular element.

The Doyen nodded. “He was an extremely powerful wizard.” He explained. “And a skilled elemental, but he took on too much, and paid the price.”

“What happened?” Harry asked softly.

“He added the air element to his strongest elements of earth and water. The power and control needed became too great from him and he lost consciousness. The elements were unleashed, and it was only due to my unpractised abilities at the time that the deaths of all those innocents who had come to watch was prevented.”

His eyes suddenly met with Harry’s, and the boy could sense the seriousness of the Doyen’s warning. “It pained me to have to give you these powers at such a young age, if only because I have seen so many young men like yourself become warped by the sense of power that accompanies such a gift. But I trust you have heeded my warning. Take each step slowly. Leo will guide you along but you must progress only when you feel you are ready to control to the next level. If you don’t then you will surely die, as will all those who would be unfortunate enough to be near you at the time.”

Harry nodded. He understood how easy it would be to succumb to the desire to unleash the elements at someone he hated as much as he did Voldemort, but he also understood that everything would come at a price. He nodded again, adding this new information to the mental pledge he had lived by since that fateful night a month before.

“But the elements would destroy him?” Harry asked, not needing to specify the topic of his thoughts to the old man.

The Doyen stared at him, as if weighing up the sincerity of the boy’s question and Harry returned his gaze steadily. Eventually the man saw what he had been looking for and replied. “At the risk of your own life, then yes.”

Harry felt his heart start to race, and the sense of determination that had been present since he had arrived at Marcello suddenly flared. A power the Dark Lord knows not. Harry felt a grin begin to spread on his face. He had found the strength and the power to fulfil the prophecy, and he no longer feared facing the Dark Lord again.

The sound of coughing distracted Harry from his silent celebrations and he turned to see the old man choking weakly against the back of one frail wrist. Harry glanced around the room and saw a pitcher of water and a couple of glasses on a nearby table. He stood up and filled one of the tumblers, before taking a hesitant seat on the edge of the bed and helping the ailing man sip the cool liquid before placing the glass back on the table.

“Thank you,” the dying man said, and Harry just nodded.

The Doyen took a couple of deep breaths before Harry realised that he was still sitting on the bed. He made to stand up and return to a respectful distance, but was prevented from doing so by a claw like grip around his wrist.

“I have one more thing that I must tell you before you leave.”

“Oh I wasn’t leaving....” Harry started to say, but was interrupted when the old man looked away from him to focus on something

across the room from them. Harry followed his gaze and his eyes started to glow with desire as he recognised the Doyen's katana sheathed and hanging on the wall beside the door.

"Please get it for me." The old man asked. Harry made his way quickly around the bed and across the room, but hesitated before taking the sword from its mountings. As soon as he had the blade in his hands, he shut his eyes as the same sense of calmness that he had experienced in the glade returned to him.

It took him a while to remember where he was, and he once more found it an effort to walk to the bed and return the blade to its rightful master.

"It is called the Sword of Kudos," the Doyen said, pulling the katana from its sheath with a practised movement. "There are not many people who can wield it. It remains loyal only to one Master and will always come to that Master when called." He smiled as he reminisced again. "You will find that it has an aversion to strangers attempting to use it, and it will find a way to injure an unauthorised user, often by causing him to lose a duel."

Harry looked incredulously at the seemingly innocent blade. "It can do that?" he asked. The Doyen smiled and nodded. "But I used it, that time by the lake..."

The Doyen nodded knowingly again. "The Sword of Kudos will pass its loyalties onto whomsoever it chooses, though that is usually the to the warrior who has defeated the original Master or to whoever the Master decides to pass it onto. Since it has fallen into the hands of the Doyens that have run this school it has been used as a symbol of power, to show whom it is that controls Marcello."

He took the blade of the sword carefully and turned it so that the hilt faced Harry. The sixteen year old stared at the beautifully engraved metalwork, not really comprehending what the Master had meant by his words. "Its time for me to leave soon, and it is only right that I leave the care of the school in the hands of someone I know will be worthy of its honour."

Harry started shaking his head, comprehension dawning, but the Doyen held out the sword closer to him. "You are the only person in the past fifty years of this school who has been able to wield this blade without injuring himself or suffering some other mishap. You are the one it wants to fight with in the future..."

"What about Leo?" Harry interrupted. "He has been here years longer than I have! Why can't he become Doyen? I'm only sixteen years old! Most of the people here are older than I am! They'll never respect me!"

"Respect is not a matter of age." The Doyen said, resting the sword and his tired arms on the bed. "Though I admit it helps. You have to earn it; such as you have with your group of friends. They followed you into battle, did they not? And I believe that a large number of others would do the same. As for Leo, he will be there as a mentor and advisor for you as long as you need him. He can run the school for you whilst you continue to grow and learn, but I want the honour to eventually become yours.

"This school has been run in secret for too long now. It needs a fresh mind to change that, and I know that person is you." He held out the katana again. "Please take the sword, my boy. It calls to you, I know it!"

Harry shook his head at the man's words, but respected his last wishes by tentatively reaching out for the blade. He took the hilt in his hands and the sudden sense of completeness rushed through his body again, before the older man released his grip with a sigh.

"I have now fulfilled all that I need to." He said with unrivalled relief. "I can now rest." And slowly closed his eyes.

Harry sat in silence, staring alternately between the large sword that rested in his lap and the old man who laid breathing on the bed. After a long while he stood up, sheathing the sword before making his way quietly from the room.

As he stepped into the Doyen's study, the other three stood up to greet him but stopped in shock when they recognised the blade that

Harry held it in his hands. Harry shook his head in confusion and held out the sword to Leo. "I don't think he was in his right mind," he said, taking some steps closer to the Master. "He told me to take it, that it was rightfully mine, but..."

Leo held up his hands and refused to touch the blade. "In which case the sword is yours, Pyro." He said. "The Sword of Kudos will not allow another to touch it, and you should remember that when it comes to offering it to another to hold. The consequences of such actions can be severe."

Harry just shook his head, and looked to Kat and Horus who were standing wide-eyed and next to each other.

"You're the new Doyen?" Horus asked disbelievingly.

Harry shook his head. "No!" he exclaimed. "How can I be? You are older than I am" Hell, most of the boys here are older than I am! I can't be!"

Kat bit her lip for a while, and Harry could see she wanted to be happy for him, but the absurdity of the situation prevented her from letting her emotions show. "What did he say?" she asked.

Harry shrugged, dropping tiredly onto the arm of one of the comfy chairs. "He said that the school needs a fresh mind to change things. He said that you would help me run it until I have the experience to take the honour on myself." He looked up at Leo as he spoke, and was startled to see the Master smile and nod.

"In which case I fully support his decisions." he replied.

"What?" Harry exclaimed. "Why?"

"Well, the Sword of Kudos has only been a symbol of the leader of this school because of one Master who won the right to wield it in a duel many, many years ago, and since then it has been passed on as one Doyen defeats and replaces another. But as the katana has chosen you for it's new master at such a young age, then I would assume it recognises some sort of potential inside you. In which case,

I would be honoured to run this school on your behalf, until you reach a standard and gain enough experience to be able to do so yourself.”

He fell to one knee and lowered his head in respect. To Harry’s added amusement Horus and Kat followed his actions.

“Oh don’t be stupid!” he exclaimed. “This is madness! How can I run a school at sixteen?”

“You won’t run it until you’re ready.” Leo pointed out.

“And until then Leo can take charge of running the school, and we can work on getting you ready for leadership!” Kat said reassuringly.

“Just one problem with that plan.” Horus said.

“Just one?” Harry asked incredulously.

Horus nodded. “And that’s convincing the rest of the school that you are now in charge.”

Leo and Kat looked at each other in realisation at the not so easy task that lay ahead. Harry just continued to shake his head, staring at the sword in his hands. Why me? He was thinking. Why me?

Chapter 39: Another loss

Harry raised his arms as Kat wrapped a thick belt around his waist. "Do I really have to wear all this?" he asked, looking at himself in a full-length mirror. He was wearing loose fitting trousers that were customary battle-wear for those training at Marcello, though these were much smarter than his usual attire. He wore a white t-shirt under his top which came down over his hips and which was held together by the thick brown belt Kat was pulling tight around him. He had washed his hair thoroughly that morning and Kat had pulled it back neatly with black cord before it had dried, making his hair sit unnaturally flat against his scalp. "I look like a Malfoy!" he said with a frown.

"Oh, quit moaning." Kat said, giving the belt another tug that threatened to overbalance Harry and stood up in front of him, blocking his view of the mirror. "You have to make a good first impression on the students." She said, and started to help Harry strap the sheath of his new sword across his back.

The Doyen had finally passed away that morning, after drifting in and out of consciousness for over a week. Leo had attributed his long death to the fact that he had been holding on for so long that he had forgotten that all life must end eventually. It had been obvious to Harry, as he had sat with Leo by the old man's side, that the Doyen had died the moment he had finished talking to Harry, and that it was only his shell-like body, so used to clinging onto life, which refused to give up.

The students had been called together for a meeting that afternoon, and it was at this gathering that Harry would be announced as the new wielder of the Sword of Kudos, and the future Doyen.

"How do you think they're going to take it?" Harry asked Kat as he sheathed his blade and adjusted the leather straps so that they lay more comfortably across his chest.

She shrugged. "I don't think the students would care that much to be honest." She said. "I suspect you may have to do something in the

future to prove that you are worthy of such acclaim, but until then I think they will be content to have the school continue as normal.”

“But...?” Harry prompted, sensing that she had more to say.

Kat sighed and turned away, looking into the mirror at their reflections. “I’m worried about my father.” She admitted. “No one has seen him for days and I don’t think he even knows about the Doyen’s death. I’m worried that he is up to something, and that when he comes back to find everything has changed...”

Harry wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her closer to him, marvelling at how well their images seemed to fit together in the mirror. “I won’t let him do anything to you.” he promised.

Kat turned to him and looked up into his eyes. “I’m more worried about him doing something to you!” she replied.

“Don’t be.” Harry said. “After all, I am the Great Doyen!” he spun around in a circle, his arms outstretched in mock grandeur.

Kat laughed easily and pulled him close again. “Just promise me that you’ll keep an eye out for him, okay?” she asked, and Harry nodded. He gently took hold of her face and captured her lips in a long kiss before they were interrupted by a cough at the door.

“Its time.” Leo said, and once more left the room.

Harry puffed out a nervous breath. “It’ll be fine!” Kat told him. “Once they see that you have the support of Leo and Horus most of them will already be won over!”

“I hope so.” Harry said, and started following Leo down the corridor to the dining hall, his clammy hand held tightly by Kat.

They stepped through a side entrance to the hall and Harry followed Leo up onto the raised platform where the head table stood, leaving Kat to join Sheridan and the others in the crowd of gathered students.

Harry took his place next to the other Masters who glanced curiously in his direction. Most of them had already been informed of the situation, and although many of them were wary of Harry's new title, they were willing to continue to run things under the direction of Leo until Harry became experienced enough to take control. This was with the exception of Orson who, Harry noted, was still nowhere to be found.

A murmuring started amongst the students as they noticed the sword lashed noticeably across Harry's back. The boy's eyes darted nervously around the room of sixty-plus students until they met with several faces that he recognised. His friends gave him encouraging nods and Harry took a settling breath as Leo stepped forward, his hands raised for silence.

"This morning the Doyen passed away due to old age. He was a well-respected man, for both his skills with a sword, and his dedication and patience for tutoring many of the finest students to leave Marcello. I ask that you lower your heads as a mark of respect for such an outstanding man."

The Marcello students all took up the same position, their feet placed shoulder width apart and their hands clasped behind their backs as they lowered their heads in silence.

After a couple of minutes, Leo looked up and continued the speech he had composed with Harry previously. "As one of his final wishes, he requested that Pyro should be given the responsibilities that accompany the Sword of Kudos, and in addition to this, the Sword has also accepted Pyro as its new Master."

Another bout of conversation broke out amongst the students as the implication of this became known. Harry watched as Brandon retorted angrily to a comment made by his neighbour, and Brogan had to put a firm hand on his arm to calm the raven-animagus as Leo continued to speak.

"Pyro will also take on the responsibilities as the head of this school. Though, due to his age and relative inexperience, the school shall be

continued to be run by the Masters until such a time that Pyro can take over..."

"WHAT IS GOING ON HERE?"

The students standing in the hall spun as one to Orson standing in the doorway, his heavily built frame blocking the entrance as he stared with dark eyes up to the raised platform where Harry was standing.

"The Doyen passed away early this morning, Orson." Leo explained patiently. "He had been getting weaker for many days and..."

"What is that boy doing with that sword?"

Leo glanced at Harry. "That was what I was just explaining to the school." He said. "The sword was given to Pyro by the Doyen, and has taken to him. He is able to handle it better than anyone."

"No!" Orson snarled, pulling his own sword from its sheath. "If the Doyen truly is gone, then I am the next most experienced person in this school. That sword belongs to me!"

Harry shared a glance with Leo before stepping forward. Instinct told him that standing up to Orson would reflect in the impression he made on the other students, and he made a Gryffindor effort to ensure that his voice stayed calm and unwavering as he spoke. "I heard that this sword has its own mind." He said, his voice carrying clearly through the air. "It chooses its own master."

"In which case, you wouldn't object for me to challenge you for it!" Orson said, swinging his blade a couple of times before he directed it at Harry.

Harry took another couple of steps forward and jumped lightly off the front of the platform, ignoring Leo as the Master called his name softly.

He was amazed when the students parted before him, leaving a clear pathway to where Orson stood. At first he thought this was out of respect for his new title, but the eager anticipation on the faces of the students told him otherwise; they were waiting to see how he would fair in a duel with Orson.

Harry calmly took a couple more steps forward, using the time to think through his options. He remembered the Doyen saying that it was time for a change of thinking at Marcello, and once more steeled himself in preparation to Orson's response to his next actions.

He stopped in the middle of the hall, surrounded by the other students, and met Orson's dark gaze. "I will not fight you," he said.

The response from Orson made many of the usually fearless boys jump backwards. He charged down the length of the hall and pulled himself up to his full height above Harry, reminding everyone of his animagus form.

"You dare deny me a duel? Again?" he snarled. "You are insolent, pathetic and weak! You take the sword that was duly owed me and you use my daughter for your own pleasures, yet still you refuse me a duel?"

"I love Kat!" Harry exclaimed, raising his voice. "And there is nothing you can do to change that! If you can't stand seeing your own daughter happy, then that is your problem. But I will not fight you!"

Harry spun on his heel and made his way back down the path that had been cleared by the students. He kept his senses focused on Orson's movements, anticipating the spell he was sure the bear-animagus would send his way.

Sure enough, Harry sensed rather than heard the curse being cast and spun to his left, using his momentum to throw himself clear of the spell and pull the Sword of Kudos from its sheath, lifting his left hand to direct another curse back towards Orson at the same time.

He was vaguely aware of a flash of green before his vision was blocked by a blanket of gold. He watched in horror as Kat leapt in

front of him, blocking the unforgivable that would've passed him by and the impact from the curse sent them both flying backwards onto the floor.

Harry stared in shock at the body that lay in his lap, watching as Kat's eyes lost focus and her head fell against the crook of his arm.

"No." he whispered, shaking his head. "Not you, too." He dropped his sword to the ground and brushed some of her hair away from her face, resting his palm against her cheek. "You can't do this to me, Kat. You promised you would be there for me. I wouldn't have let him hurt me, you know that! Wake up? Please?" He waited desperately for some sort of response from his girlfriend but her eyes continued to stare blindly upwards.

Harry heard movement in front of him and looked up to see Orson standing in front of him, a slightly dazed look on his face. The girl's father met Harry's blank gaze and narrowed his eyes, turning them into black holes that glittered menacingly. He tore a chain from his neck and Harry's eyes widened in recognition at the Dark Mark medallion that hung from it.

"Now you will pay." Orson snarled, lunging forward and tearing Harry away from his daughter's body. He muttered a short incantation and before any of the other students could stop them both Harry and the bear-animagus had disappeared from the school.

* * * * *

Chapter 40: Battle of Hogsmead

Harry felt the familiar tug on his navel as they port-keyed away and didn't need to look around to know that he was once again in the presence of Voldemort.

He started to struggle violently with Orson, eventually managing to push the larger man away enough to aim a punch at his jaw, catching it at an upward angle and sending the hefty man to the floor unconscious.

He looked about him, dimly aware of someone shouting out orders. He tensed as he felt a number of spells head his way and ducked them, forcing up a protective shield around his body and twisting until he found himself face-to-face with Voldemort.

"So, you decided to return." The Dark Wizard said with a smile.

"Not by choice." Harry returned coldly, twisting away once more to avoid another bout of spells sent his way. This movement sent him in front of another face he despised. "Lestrangle!" he sneered before staggering towards her as a curse hit his shoulder. He bit back a scream and fell to one knee as he felt his skin rip along its scars and spun on one knee to see Avery standing there, casually spinning his wand between his fingers with a cruel smile on his face.

"I missed you, Potter." He said with a sick smile and took a step forward as Voldemort yelled out an order to tie Harry up.

Harry closed his eyes briefly, taking a deep breath and calming his nerves before consciously pushing aside his pain. He raised his clenched fists above his head, grimacing as his wounds opened further and started gushing blood, before bringing them hard into the ground. He called upon the earth element to send tremors through the floor of the Riddle household that caused all those standing to stagger or fall to the ground.

Panic ensued. Many of the Death Eaters started shouting and running for the exits as the foundations of the house began to groan

and the walls started to shake, as if they were no longer able to hold the weight they bore.

Harry staggered to his feet as people rushed by, his eyes focused solely on the only other person in the room who wasn't moving. Emerald eyes met the red slits of Voldemort as the Dark Wizard scowled at Harry. "I will come for you." he mouthed, though his words were lost over the noise of the collapsing building.

And I will be waiting. Harry returned silently before summoning his remaining energy and disappearing.

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Harry appeared in front of the two large gateposts that marked the start of the long driveway that led up to the Hogwarts castle. He barely glanced at the two animated figures of winged boars that stared down at him with a keen interest as he staggered through the gates. His battle robes dishevelled and sodden with blood due to the open cuts underneath, felt heavy as he stumbled up the main drive to the school.

He brushed a weary hand across his face, wincing as he felt the stream of blood flowing down it from his lightning bolt scar, and pushed himself into an unsteady jog. He figured that, being in the condition that he was and having used most of his reserves to control the earth element, he shouldn't risk wasting the energy to apparate around Hogwarts' grounds in case he ended up splinching himself.

He was gasping for air by the time he reached the main doors of the castle, his head dizzy from the lack of blood, and he had to lean heavily against the solid doors to get them to open. He let his legs take control to follow the well-known route and turned all his attention to providing enough stamina to make it up the stairs.

As he reached the tall double doors that led to the great hall, Harry summoned up the last of his energy and felt relieved as the doors flew open before him with a burst of wandless magic, swinging wide and banging against the walls. He staggered into the familiar eating-

place with its enchanted ceiling and collapsed against the end of the Hufflepuff table, sending its occupants screaming away from him.

Harry took barely a moment to try and collect some of his misty thoughts before looking up at the head table and silently thanking Merlin that all the teaching staff were present. He pushed himself off from the table, biting back another cry as his body complained for more rest and he lurched down the centre aisle.

He distantly heard the headmaster calling for people not to panic and to remain in their seats as Harry forced himself further into the safety of the Hogwarts students. He was about half way down the length of the hall when he met the Hogwarts staff heading towards him. He managed to pick out the concerned face of Remus Lupin and made one final effort to push himself into the man's arms before his legs gave way.

"Oh Merlin! Harry?" Remus fell to his knees when Harry collapsed against him, cradling the injured boy to his chest as Harry clutched at his robes.

"He found me," Harry gasped, desperately trying to focus on the werewolf's face. "He's coming for me."

Harry watched through a thick haze as Remus raised his head to look questioningly at the headmaster who was leaning over them both. Harry pleaded with his eyes at the blurred image of Dumbledore until the headmaster nodded, his eyes noticeably lacking their customary twinkle.

"It begins." He said quietly and dropped to one knee beside Harry and Remus. "Rest now," he said, placing one hand against Harry's forehead. Harry immediately felt a sense of peace envelope his body and sighed slightly, relaxing into his friend's arms. "We'll deal with him this time."

Harry nodded and let his eyes lose their focus and close. He barely felt Remus lift him gently from the floor and carry him from the hall, whispering soft encouragement to the injured boy all the way to the medic wing.

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Remus Lupin hovered anxiously by the unconscious and wounded body of his friends' son as Madam Pomfrey gently peeled the boy's blood soaked shirt over his head and dumped it unceremoniously into a bucket behind her.

The nurse frowned as she saw the extent of the cuts that covered the boy's torso and arms, and held out a wet cloth and a large jar full of a lumpy green liquid over the bed towards Lupin.

"Start on his arms" she said briskly as she quickly performed a well-practised move to make Harry swallow some potions she was giving him. "Wipe away the blood and cover the whole of the wound in the cream, it should help stop the bleeding and encourage the wounds to close over."

Remus nodded, and took a deep breath before starting at Harry's wrist and wiping away some of the blood. He had never seen so much of the crimson liquid on a body before, even with his experiences of the terrors that Voldemort had inflicted on the wizarding community. He managed to locate one of the cuts and stuck two of his fingers into the cold gel-like substance and smoothed a fine layer over the cut.

"Don't hold back on plastering him with it." the nurse scolded, starting work on some of the larger cuts that crossed Harry's torso. She frowned as she saw the depth of the wound that Orson had inflicted and started applying the cream thickly over it. "The more you put on the better the wounds will heal. Though I can't imagine how we can prevent any scarring."

Remus nodded again, and applied a thicker layer on the smaller cuts that covered the back of Harry's forearms, wincing in sympathy for the unconscious boy as he started applying the cream to the deeper cuts across his shoulders.

"You think he'll be okay?" he asked after a time of silent working. He knelt on the bed and supported Harry's weight with his shoulder as

Pomfrey levered him forward and started working on the wounds on his back.

“He’s bounced back from more injuries than I care count.” The matron said distractedly as she concentrated on wiping some of the blood from the boy’s back. “I imagine that all of these have accumulated since the time he first went missing and have been reopened – probably with that curse Severus mentioned.”

She leant back slightly to rinse the bloodied cloth in a small bowl and looked over the unconscious boy with a critical eye. “It seems to me as if he’s filled out a lot since the end of last year. A lot of physical exercise and a steady amount of good meals always bring out the best in a growing lad. A couple of blood replenishing potions, maybe a bit of pepper-up and he’ll be complaining about being cooped up in here within a couple of days.”

She frowned slightly as she placed a hand on the back of his neck. “Though he does seem unnaturally hot.” She mused to herself, almost forgetting that the werewolf was still perched on the side of the bed with Harry’s head leaning heavily on his shoulder. “Maybe he was hit with another curse before he managed to escape.” She sighed and started covering his back with a thick layer of the green concoction. “I’ll give him something to lower his temperature when he wakes up.” She said after a while and indicated that Remus could lay the boy back down.

Just then the door to the hospital ward flew open and Cho Chang came rushing in. “You-Know-Who is in Hogsmead.” She gasped to Remus. “Professor Dumbledore wants you there as soon as possible.”

Remus looked down at the unconscious body before him before he felt the matron’s arm on his shoulder. “He needs to rest now.” She said. “He’ll still be here when you get back.”

Remus nodded and gently brushed some of Harry’s long hair from his face before leaving the ward at a half-run.

Cho looked over at the bed with wide eyes. "Is that really Harry?" she asked, hesitantly coming closer.

"Yes, it is."

"Will he be okay?" Madam Pomfrey sighed as she took in the sight of a green-pasted Harry lying on blood soaked sheets

"He'll be fine, Miss Chang." She said briskly, putting the cap on green salve that had been put on all Harry's wounds and pulling a sheet over Harry's body, covering him to his shoulders. "But if you would care to help? I have a number of potions to prepare that he really should drink within the next half hour."

Cho nodded slightly and followed the matron into her office, sending Harry one last glance as she left the room.

Almost instantly Harry's eyes flew open and he grimaced as he forced himself into a sitting position, resting his weight heavily on his arms for a few moments until the room stopped spinning.

Once he was able to, he opened his eyes and looked down at his body. The cold cream had done its job to stop the bleeding, and Harry could feel the familiar warmth that indicated that the wounds under their green blanket were already beginning to heal themselves.

He looked over towards Pomfrey's office and heard the gentle murmur of voices as she and Cho mixed some potions for him. He took a deep breath and gingerly slid himself to the edge of his bed, before slowly pushing himself to his feet.

He supposed it was his hero complex kicking in again, but he knew he couldn't leave the Hogwarts teachers to fight Voldemort by themselves. Besides, Voldemort now had Orson on his side, and probably more of the Marcello students would join him soon enough. As far as Harry was aware, no one on the Hogwarts staff had that much experience with wandless magic and blade work and so would be at a great disadvantage should some of Orson's students be there to fight alongside him.

He held on to the end of the bed with his left hand and held out his right, silently willing his new katana to come to him. The Doyen had told him that the sword would always return to its master when called, and he heaved a sigh of relief as he felt the familiar hilt appear in his hand. He glanced towards the office once more, before summoning his strength to apparate to the marked boundary of Hogwarts's anti-apparation wards.

To his relief, the apparation worked in its entirety and he once more found the attention of the twin Boars upon the gateposts directed at him. With a couple of long strides he had crossed the boundary markers and apparated nearer to Hogsmead, where he could hear the distant sounds of battle ensuing.

Harry swore softly as he rounded the corner and saw his friends and teachers fighting desperately with the Death Eaters. There was a number of Order members there that Harry recognised, as well as a number of fighters dressed in the unmistakable Auror uniform.

In the middle of the battle he saw a scene that made his blood freeze. Stood in the centre of a fighting circle of wizards, Harry could see the two confident figures of Dumbledore and Voldemort standing off opposite one another, wands drawn and each waiting for the other to make the first move.

He gripped the comforting handle of the katana and took a deep breath. "This better work." He said to himself, and focused on a point just behind Voldemort before disappearing.

Almost instantly he appeared behind Voldemort, and barely registered the shocked look in Dumbledore's face before swinging the katana and cutting deeply into Voldemort's back.

The Dark wizard let out a scream of pain and staggered away from Harry, spinning around to stare at the person who had maimed him.

"I believe you were looking for me, Tom" Harry said, stepping back slightly to give himself more time to anticipate his adversary's moves.

Voldemort's eyes narrowed, his red, slit-like eyes glinting dangerously with pain and desire for revenge as he recognised the half naked boy in front of him.

"I would've thought you would have learnt how much I detest that name by now, Potter."

"Maybe I need a few more lessons." Harry spat. He was vaguely aware of the lack of movement around him as the others stopped fighting in shock at the sight of Voldemort's bent body oozing blood. In the corner of his eye he saw Moody and Shacklebolt grab Remus' arms as the werewolf tried to get to the boy he had left unconscious in Madam Pomfrey's care moments ago.

Voldemort forced himself to stand up straight, and Harry could see the effort in his face as he fought the pain that was engulfing his body. "It looks to me that you have learnt some new tricks, Potter." He said with a sickening smile. "I didn't think you were the type to attack whilst the opposition had his back turned."

"It's what I owe you for your hospitality over the summer." Harry said. "Now we're even!"

"Harry, look out!"

Harry spun to the right, his katana flying upwards to deflect the blow that aimed at his head.

He quickly placed some distance between himself and Orson as they began to circle each other warily. In the background Harry could hear Voldemort laughing, and he hoped that he wasn't just imagining the pain-filled undertones to the Dark Wizard's voice. "You forget, Harry. I never play fair either."

Harry narrowed his eyes at the dark features of his former Master. "You're mine, boy," Orson growled as he raised his sword again.

Harry raised an eyebrow. "Do you really think you can beat me?" he asked. The anger he felt towards the man filled him with a confidence that he hadn't felt in previous confrontations with him.

He heard his name called from behind him but ignored the shouts of his friends, his focus centred only on one objective, and he slowly raised his katana to match the Masters poise.

"That title is not rightfully yours, boy." Orson snarled. "That sword belongs to me."

"The title was passed onto me," Harry returned. "And I'm not about to give it up to a murderer like you."

Orson growled again and swung at Harry who quickly deflected it, forcing himself to remain calm and gaining a sense concentrated awareness as he based his next moves on the cues he saw in the Master's dark facial features.

The hefty man quickly sank into his usual routine, aiming to catch Harry off with a speed that was surprising for a man of his size. But Harry, well aware of the man's talents after observing them at length during his duelling classes, had now built up enough stamina to survive the ferocity of Orson's attacks. He let his reflexes take control, blocking blow after blow as they fought along the length of the main street.

After a few moments, Harry felt Orson slip into a sense of a well-practised routine, and saw a look of recognition appear in the man's eyes. Harry took that moment of the man's distraction to deflect his next blow in such a way that brought the two men together, their swords locked in an upright position between them.

Harry smiled slightly. "This is your Dance." He stated quietly.

Orson blinked away some of the sweat that had dripped into his eyes and a grin started to appear on his face. "I guess it is." He said. "Seems as if you've met your match, boy. That title is mine!"

Harry shook his head slightly, and the Orson's smile faltered as he saw the confidence in Harry's gaze.

"I'll let you into a secret." Harry said in a low voice. "I have my own, and this is not it." He leant in a bit closer as he sensed his opponent's confusion. It had never occurred to Orson that Harry had been experienced enough to have developed his Dance. "I guess this means that I live to Dance another day." He looked at the two blades trapped into the two men. "And I also believe I've already broken your routine."

Orson's eyes opened wide in realisation of the truth of the younger man's words, before Harry quickly pulled his katana blade from where it was caught and started swinging the blade quickly and smoothly, causing Orson to defend himself.

Harry once more let the blade take over. This wasn't his Dance, but he felt strangely calm and confident as he let the blade swing faster and faster, driving Orson backwards along the street as the Master began to make desperate moves in defending himself. Harry once more became entranced by the flashes of silver from his blade as it crossed in front of him, and he blinked in shock the moment the rhythm stopped.

Harry froze, slightly disorientated and unsure of what had just happened as the world slowly returned into focus and he once more became aware of what was going on around him. He focused on the pair of dark eyes opposite him that mirrored the look of surprise that was prominent in his own. Harry didn't dare breathe as Orson dropped his head to look down, and Harry slowly followed his gaze to see his own hand firmly gripping the hilt of the blade that disappeared into the man's torso.

Harry took a small gasp of breath as the realisation of what he had done hit his body, but he frowned as he raised his head once more. "You killed Kat." He said in cold tone. "You killed your own daughter for a title that is worth nothing more than the sword in my hands." Harry shook his head, his throat painful and his eyes filling with tears of anguish as he felt his emotions return in full force. "You deserve this." And with that he jerked his arm back, pulling his blade free from the man's stomach and took two steps away from Orson as the beast of a man fell to his knees, then slumped to the side.

Harry stared down at him, hatred burning in his chest and tears filling his eyes with the anguish he felt for losing Kat. The tears soon turned into ones of self-loathing though, as he realised that he had once more taken a life.

His head snapped up at the sound of solitary applause and met the gaze directed at him by Voldemort.

"I see you have been training hard." Voldemort said stepping closer to Harry.

"In more ways than you'll ever know." Harry said, ignoring the streams of hot tears that ran down his face.

"Indeed. It seems I now have an opponent worthy enough to fight me."

"You've never beaten me before." Harry said. "Nothing's changed. Except that your statement seems to be your way of admitting that you're scared."

"Of a sixteen year old boy?" Voldemort laughed again. "Your time will come, Potter."

Harry surprised the man by nodding in agreement. "I'm not going to deny it won't." He said, his voice calmer. "But so will yours. You bleed just like everyone else, Voldemort. And no one can live forever."

Voldemort's eyes narrowed dangerously. "Next time, Potter." He said and disappeared, many of the Death Eaters that were able to follow shortly afterwards.

Harry nodded at the now empty space in front of him. "Next time." He repeated softly.

"Harry!"

Harry turned to see his friends quickly closing the distance between them, Remus leading the group.

“Harry,” the werewolf repeated in a softer voice, but hesitated as he looked down at the dead man at the teenager’s feet.

Harry smiled slightly, his tears drying on his face. “In any normal situation I would be taken off to Azkaban for killing a teacher.” He said grimly, and looked up at the shocked faces on the adults before him. “I have to go sort this.” He said in a monotone. “I have to tell them what’s happened.”

“Tell who, Harry?” Dumbledore asked in a gentle voice.

“Where have you been?” Tonks added.

Harry sighed. “That is a story for when we have more time.” He said, and stooped down to drag Orson to his feet. He grunted and staggered a little under the man’s weight, but eventually got him so that he was balanced and wandlessly summoned his sword back into his hand from where he momentarily rested it against the ground.

He looked at Remus. “I’ll be back.” He promised. “Soon.”

Remus shook his head. “Don’t go.” He pleaded. “You’re injured. You were barely conscious when I left you, and now you’re just going to disappear again?”

Harry looked down at his bare chest that was still covered in the green-gel and fought the spring of tears that once more threatened to escape his eyes. “I have no choice.” He said, thinking of his duties of Doyen and the need to face the death of his girlfriend. “But I will be back this time. Voldemort has to recover, to regroup.” He smiled slightly, though the sentiment didn’t reach his eyes. “I guess he’ll also have to find new headquarters; his won’t be in any fit state to live in anymore. In the meantime, that gives us a chance to catch up. To get ourselves ready for when he attacks again.” He swallowed painfully and his voice broke with tired emotion as the events of the day caught up with him, “I’ve really missed everyone.”

“And we’ve missed you, Harry.” Dumbledore said, placing a restraining hand on Remus’ shoulder. “Hurry home to us.”

Harry nodded and smiled again. "See you soon." He murmured, then disappeared away with Orson's body, leaving Remus with an ache inside his chest and the feeling that he had once more lost the boy he had been searching for.

* * * * *

Chapter 41: The return.

Barely a week later the Hogwarts students were filing into the Great Hall for their evening meal. As they entered, many of the Gryffindors automatically looked up at assess the moods of the professors sitting up at the head table.

“Nothing’s changed.” Ron muttered as he saw the serious faces of Dumbledore, Snape and McGonagall and the beaten face of Remus Lupin as the adults helped themselves to the food.

Hermione sighed. “We’re just getting our hopes up again.” She said, sitting at her usual place on the Gryffindor table. “He was gone for months last time. What makes anyone think that he would come back any sooner this time?”

“Because he was injured.” Dean said from where he was sitting, and at the questioning looks of his friends he went on to explain. “It’s a common fact that when an animal is injured, it heads for someplace it feels safe. Why would it be any different for Harry? This is his safe place, that why he ended up staggering in here the other day. He’ll be back.”

Hermione glanced down at the necklace Harry had made for her and gently rubbed it with her hand. She and Ron hadn’t been able to find out anything about the strange liquid in the stone, but she couldn’t help notice that Dean’s words had a similar ring to the words Harry had included in his letter; a good luck charm...a homing beacon of sorts...

She looked up at Ron as he continued to argue with Dean, accentuating his words with his fork. “But he didn’t come back here once he escaped from Voldemort.” He was saying, no longer fearing the Dark Wizard’s name, though a number of people on the table still flinched. “He went somewhere else when he was hurt that time. And look how long he stayed away.”

Ginny pushed her plate away forcefully. “Give it up, Ron!” she said. “We all know how much you really miss him, and I don’t believe for one moment that you really hate him for staying away.”

Ron frowned sullenly, but looked down at his plate to avoid his sister's glare. Hermione noticed his hand reach up and rub at a small lump that rested on his chest under his robes. She smiled and gave Ginny a quick nod to show that she had gotten through to him. Ginny returned the smile as Ron mumbled something, unaware of the looks being passed around his friends.

"What was that, Ron?" Seamus asked politely.

"I said that he still has some explaining to do." Ron repeated a bit louder. "But, yes, I am worried about him. And I do want to see him come home."

The others returned silently to their meals, all pleased that Ron had finally admitted that he still missed Harry, but their heads rose again as they started to hear a soft melody echo around the hall. As the tune became louder Hermione felt a warmth around her neck and clutched at her pendant, noticing that Ron was doing the same with his.

"Is that music?" Neville asked, frowning as others along the table started to raise their heads, nervously glancing around the room to find its origin.

"I don't know." Ginny replied. "I can't work out if I'm actually hearing something, or just feeling it."

Ron nodded in agreement as the feeling became stronger, and within moments the great hall filled with the warm sound of phoenix song. Many of the students had never heard such a sound before and were looking around in confusion; the younger students looking to the older students and the older students looking towards the head table where the professors were glancing around the room in wonder. HG and RW

Hermione shut her eyes briefly, allowing the warmth of the phoenix song to penetrate every fibre of her body and a comforting shiver ran down her spine as the song increased in volume.

A shout of alarm from the Hufflepuff table broke through the song as the large oak doors of the hall flew open on their own accord, admitting a large gold/black phoenix soaring gracefully in all its glory, followed closely by Fawkes.

"Harry's phoenix!" Ron said aloud in amazement and Hermione nodded in reply, not taking her eyes off the two phoenixes as they soared around the room.

Fawkes eventually broke off from the flight and settled himself on Dumbledore's shoulder, leaving the new phoenix to finish its lap of the hall and hover in the middle between the Hufflepuff and the Ravenclaw tables, facing the head table. With a final note the phoenix ended its song and instead began to produce a golden glow, enveloping the entire hall with such a bright light that all the staff and students had to cover their eyes.

When the glow had subsided and the occupants of Hogwarts were able to see again many gasped or shouted in surprise to find a half circle of twenty or more strangers standing at intervals around the four houses. Most looked to be in their late teens and were clothed in well-worn brown battledress, each with a different animal emblem emblazoned on the front. All were heavily armed, with fierce looking blades strapped to their backs or bows and quivers of arrows just visible from where they were hung on their shoulders.

However, it was not the weapons that suddenly rid Hermione of the warmth that the phoenix song had produced moments before, but the lack of friendliness on the faces of the young men stood around the hall. In fact, Hermione surmised to herself, it seemed unlikely that any of the young men had smiled for a long time.

She was broken out of her thoughts by a nudge from Ron who gave a quick nod to the centre of the half-circle where one of the strangers stepped forward, his face hidden from view by his cloak and flanked on either side by two more of the armed young men. The Gryffindors noticed that each one of them had a different animal emblem on their chest as the central figure reached up to lower his hood, revealing an older man with a beard and dark eyes. With a final call, the phoenix stopped hovering and flew to land on the man's shoulder.

“What is the meaning of this?” Dumbledore’s voice carried clearly through the silence of the shocked hall. “Who are you? And why are you here?”

Hermione’s eyes darted between the three figures who now stood in the centre of the hall where the phoenix had hovered moments before, the threatening postures of the twenty young men flanking the walls, and the head table where all the staff had their hands on their wands. Her mind worked double time as she tried to make sense of the situation.

“Harry?” Ron whispered under his breath, but Hermione shook her head.

“I can’t see him.” She replied in the same tone of voice. “He’s not here. Maybe something has happened...”

“How did they get in here?” Neville interrupted from the other side of the table. “I thought you couldn’t apparate into Hogwarts?”

Hermione shook her head amazement. “You can’t.” she replied in a broken voice, flummoxed at what she had just seen. “And even if a phoenix could, it wouldn’t be able to apparate so many people with it. Its just not possible.”

“Well, I hate to break it to you.” Seamus spoke up from Hermione’s right side. “But it did, and they’re here.”

Hermione just shook her head again, and silence fell as the older man turned and lifted a hand to gently stroke the feathers of the phoenix on his shoulder. The phoenix gave a small nod of his head, as if answering a tacit question, and they both looked up to the head table.

“I am Leo.” The dark-clad stranger spoke with a soft but clear voice, and the whole hall stayed silent to hear him. “I am a Master at the Marcello School of Opportunity....” A ripple of recognition ran through the expression of the teachers at the head table and Ron noticed a number of the Slytherins suddenly start to whisper amongst

themselves. But a quick glance at his girlfriend revealed that she had never heard of it. "I understand that some of you have heard of us." The dark skinned boy on his left started to smile but the other two remained impassive.

"That school is a myth." Snape blurted out from the head table. "Nothing more than an excuse people use when their troublesome children leave home and disappear."

"Indeed." The boy on the Master's right said. "So how do you explain the sudden appearance of so many students?"

The grinning boy unsheathed his sword with practised motion and there was a sudden movement on the tables next to him as the Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff students sought to place as much distance between themselves and the blade as possible.

The phoenix resting on the man's shoulder gave a small cry and raised his wings slightly, almost as a warning before the central man continued to speak. "Marcello specialises in combat..." The school watched as the boy ran his thumb down the edge of his blade. "...of both the magical and physical sort. As you can probably guess that this goes against many of your Ministry's rules, particularly regarding our methods of teaching..."

"What has this to do with your being here?" Dumbledore interrupted as the phoenix gave another small cry and the boy slowly replaced his blade.

The Master looked up at him. "A short while ago a new student came into our midst. He opened our eyes with the remarkable abilities he possessed and even more so with the level of control he had over these powers..." There were a number of coughs from the students lining the walls and Hermione observed the two young men flanking the Master sharing a couple of wry smiles.

When no one spoke for a few moments she looked up at the head table to see a look of understanding cross the headmaster's face.

The three strangers gave a nod when Dumbledore sent them a questioning look. A small smile crossed his face and the twinkle returned to his eyes as he looked over the young men lining the walls of the hall, frowning slightly when he failed to recognise the young man that he sought.

“I believe a more private discussion is in order.” He announced. “Ms Chang, Mister Bishop, if you could escort our guests to the largest defence room and ensure they are made comfortable whilst they wait? Prefects, once everyone has finished eating I would like you to lead you houses back to their common rooms where you shall stay until further notice. Master Leo, if you would kindly make you way to my office where you can talk more privately with myself and some of my staff.” He hesitated for a second before saying. “Ms Granger. Mister Weasley. You may wish to join us.”

* * * * *

Chapter 42: Explanations

Hermione and Ron walked along the corridor that led to the Hogwarts' headmaster's office, both silent as they tried to work out why Dumbledore would want them there for the meeting.

"This must have something to do with Harry." Ron said. "What with him staggering into the hall like that the other day, and disappearing again. Then there's that phoenix..."

"Not to mention the uniforms of those students." Hermione added. Ron looked at her with a frown and she went on to explain. "Remember Fred and George's descriptions of the group of fighters that thwarted the attack on Diagon Alley?"

Ron nodded, his eyes wide. "Of course, brown uniforms, swords..." he frowned. "But what would Harry be doing with people like that?" he asked.

"We don't even know if he was with them." She said as they started to climb the spiral stairs. "I looked at all their faces, but I couldn't see him anywhere."

"But Dumbledore looked really happy about something." Ron said. "Maybe he knows something we don't."

Hermione stayed silent, then gently reached out and took Ron's hand. "If he does then maybe we'll find out once and for all where Harry's been, and where he is now."

Ron smiled and gently placed a kiss on her forehead as they stood outside Dumbledore's office door. "Let's hope for some answers then." He said, and pushed at the door, swinging it open before him.

They entered to see the wizard who had called himself Leo stood by the roaring fire, staring deeply into its heart. Behind him, standing by the window with his back to them stood another man, wearing a dark green cloak with its hood raised. Hermione glanced at her boyfriend who shrugged and made his way further into the office, choosing to

stand near a table full of strange gadgets that made odd little noises as they moved.

They stood in an uneasy silence for only a few moments before the door opened once more and Dumbledore entered, Fawkes flying from his shoulder to land on his perch by the desk. Behind him followed Lupin, Snape and McGonagall.

Dumbledore's eyes lit up when he saw the newcomer standing by the window. "So, Harry." He said, after quickly conjuring up a number of comfortable sofa's around the fire with a flick of his wand. "Are you going to finally tell us where you have been for the past six months?"

Ron, Hermione and the Hogwarts stared at the headmaster in disbelief as Leo smiled and the tall stranger at the window chuckled, turning around and lowering his hood. "Nothing gets past you, does it professor?" he stepped forward and firmly shook the old man's hand.

Before them stood a young man, well tanned with a gleaming white smile, shoulder length black hair tied back with a bit of cord and glowing emerald eyes.

He turned to Hermione and Ron. "Surprise!" he said weakly, unsure of how they would react.

"Harry?" Hermione's eyes filled with tears. "Oh, my! Harry! It really is you!" she launched herself at him and enveloped him in a tight hug.

When she finally released him, Harry looked up at Ron with a smile. "Hi, Ron." He said simply.

Ron shook his head and tried to keep his stern expression, but soon his face began to return the smile, a bright grin transforming his features as he stepped forward and wrapped his arms around his friend. "Welcome home, mate," he muttered. He stepped back a bit and shook his head. "You didn't half give us a scare the other day, you know?"

Harry nodded. "I'm really sorry about that." He said. "I never really meant to end up here. But I guess Hogwarts is my home. My safe place."

Ron nodded in understanding, and pulled out his phoenix pendant to show his friend. "You'll never change, Harry." He said with a smile.

"Oh, I wouldn't know about that." Remus said, stepping forward and pulling Harry close. After a few moments he pulled away, his eyes glistening slightly. "I seem to think the lad has grown a few inches since he first disappeared."

"I've missed you, Remus." Harry said, before looking at the rest of the group. "I've missed all of you so much."

"I think the feeling is mutual, Mister Potter." Professor McGonagall said, stepping forward and surprising Harry by giving him a small but affectionate embrace. "As your friend so rightly put it, welcome home."

Harry nodded before turning to the final member of the group. "Snape." He said with a nod.

"Potter." The potions master replied before stepping forward with his hand outstretched. He nodded slightly as they shook, respect filling his eyes. "And thank you."

Harry smiled in return. "You're most welcome."

"What happened to you, Harry?" Hermione asked. "Where have you been for so long? And what happened to your glasses? Your eyes look a lot greener without them."

Harry laughed slightly and held up his hands. "I'll explain everything if you give me the chance." He said. "Though its going to be rather a long story, and we might be here a while."

"Hence the comfortable chairs and refreshments." Dumbledore replied and with an unmistakable twinkle in his wise eyes he stepped forward and took a seat. Within moments the other occupants of the

room had sat themselves down, with Leo sitting on a two-seater sofa next to the fire, the adjacent seat empty for Harry to sit down in if he wished.

“So,” he said, rocking back onto his heels. “Where do you want me to begin?”

“How about the beginning, Mister Potter?” McGonagall said, a slight smile pulling at her lips.

“Voldemort’s circle.” Snape added coolly. “Other than the other day, that seemed to be the last time we saw you alive. Why not start the story from there?”

Harry shrugged. “I would if I could, but I don’t really remember much about it.”

Snape nodded once. “Understandable, considering your condition. I gave you a potion to boost your magical energy, with the instruction to apparate out of there and back to Hogwarts as soon as you were able.”

“But something went wrong.” Remus continued. “Voldemort revealed that he was aware of Severus’ true loyalties, and we believe that you apparated him out of there and into Hogwarts’ grounds where we found him unconscious.”

“Pi must’ve apparated out at the same time.” Leo spoke up for the first time since they had entered the room. “The Doyen, our equivalent of your headmaster, found him barely alive in the forest by our school. It took him over a day to wake up. But it took him surprisingly little time to recover from the large number of wounds that covered his body.”

Snape nodded. “Avery’s Laceratus Restoro curse. It reopened any old scars that covered Harry’s body.”

Leo winced. “Ouch.” He said with a small smile directed to his pupil, reminding him of the first word he had said when he had awakened.

Harry smiled in return and put his hand on the Master's shoulder as he started to explain.

"As I was getting better I told Leo about Voldemort, and my role in the prophecy..."

"About that." Dumbledore interrupted. "I have already told everyone in the Order about the prophecy, after a certain Gryffindor reminded me that I was to keep no more secrets."

Harry saw Hermione turn red out of the corner of his eye, and he nodded. "I understand." He said. "Its probably for the best, else said Gryffindor might think I haven't got over my "saving people thing"."

Hermione sunk even further down into the sofa and Ron laughed. "So what happened when you got better?" he asked, changing the subject to save his girlfriend's dignity.

"Leo suggested that I stuck on at Marcello. He said I could develop my duelling skills there, learn more about how to handle myself in a place that specialises in that type of training."

"I suggested?" Leo asked with an eyebrow raised. Harry looked down at his feet and shrugged slightly. "The training can last for anything from a year to ten years." the Master continued. "In our way of teaching, you only move onto the next level when you prove yourself competent in the one before. Pi, here, has shown complete dedication and has carried with him a determination that I have never seen in a student his age before. He managed to complete his training in these past six months."

"Shut up, Leo." Harry muttered easily, flopping down onto the sofa next to him with his arms folded across his chest in embarrassment. "How fast I did things doesn't matter. It's what I can now do which is the important thing. Especially considering what I'm going to be up against."

"So what is it you can now do, Mister Potter?" Snape asked, with the smirk on his face that Harry remembered so well from his potion

classes, but with an added curiosity in his eyes. “Am I right to assume you have managed to master the art of using your wand in that time?”

“I’d imagine that would be rather difficult as his wand has been in my desk for the past six months.” Dumbledore replied with a sparkle in his eye.

Harry nodded. “The first thing I needed to learn was to get along without a wand. Marcello has never forgotten more ancient forms of magic. And you’ll find that only a couple of the students at the school prefer to use the aid of a wand, though a lot more use them whilst duelling.”

“You can perform wandless magic? Whenever you want? How is that possible?” Hermione asked.

Harry shrugged. “What came first, the magic or the wand? The magic of course! It’s there, inside you. But over the years wizards have forgotten how to access that magic, instead relying on the more predictable wand. It may be slightly more, um, dangerous at times than using your wand, but it has the added advantage of letting you use it without letting on to anyone else what you are doing.”

Harry stood up and went to the table where the refreshments were sitting, and picked up the jug of water.

“Can you give us an example of this?” McGonagall asked.

Harry nodded as poured out the water into a glass. “Look behind you.” he said and took a sip of the clear liquid.

The group turned in their chairs to see Dumbledore’s desk and a number of his gadgets floating around in the air – the portraits on the wall nodded appreciatively.

“Amazing.” McGonagall said, and Dumbledore’s sparkling eyes nodded in agreement as the furniture slowly began to lower itself again.

“And I’m assuming it was a variant of this ancient magic that allowed all of your students to appear in the hall as they did?” Snape directed at Leo.

The Master held up his hands in denial. “I’m afraid that was not my doing.” He said.

“The phoenix.” Hermione said. “It was singing when you appeared. It must have been some sort of summons.”

Leo made eye contact with Harry as the boy re-took his seat, handing a glass of water to the Master. Harry shrugged. “Kind of, but not quite in the way that you are thinking.” He said. “In short, it was nothing more complex than apparation.”

“Though maybe on a larger scale than what most are used to.” Leo added, smiling proudly at his student again.

“Apparation?” Hermione asked. “Impossible! In *Hogwarts: A History* it says that it is impossible to apparate into Hogwarts due to all the safety wards around it.”

“And you are right, Hermione.” Harry said. “*Hogwarts: A History* clearly states that you can’t apparate into Hogwarts, but it doesn’t say anything about apparating around Hogwarts. How else do you think Dumbledore manages to get a scene of trouble in such a short time?”

Dumbledore laughed at Hermione’s shocked expression. “Indeed, you have found me out, Harry. And I trust that those in the room will keep this from becoming public knowledge. It is supposed to be a Headmaster’s prerogative after all. Though I have found that it’s only the stronger wizards who are able to do such a thing safely. You must have a strong group of friends.”

Harry shrugged slightly. “No more than any of the students here, they have just been taught in a different way.”

“Not forgetting the fact that they weren’t the ones to apparate into the hall.” Leo muttered slightly.

"Then it was the phoenix!" Hermione exclaimed.

"As I said before, only in a way." Harry said.

"It was Pi who apparated all the students into the hall." Leo said. "He's been doing a lot of extra-curricular research on Phoenix and what they are capable of. He has worked wonders with their magical gifts, and has composed a number of good essays on the subject. Especially on how they use their song to increase the potency of the magic in their blood, enabling the students to appear into the school as they did."

"Research on phoenix, eh?" Dumbledore asked. "I have written a number of books on the subject myself. Maybe we can put aside an hour or three so we could compare notes?"

Harry grinned slightly. "I certainly hope so." he said. "I have read some of your books and I'm afraid I think them a little...." He frowned slightly as he tried to think of the right word. "Misinformed." He finished lamely, looking up slightly and hoping not to see anger in his headmaster's eyes.

If anything, all he could see was disappointment behind the half-moon shaped glasses. "Indeed." The headmaster said. "Most of it is speculation as no-one yet understands how a phoenix communicates, and I must say that Fawkes, though loyal, didn't seem the most willing of subjects."

Harry smiled slightly and nodded. "You'll find that phoenix don't like to reveal many of their secrets." He said. "They are a mysterious creature, and they tend to want to keep it that way." As he spoke a low whistle came from Fawkes' stand by the large desk and Dumbledore nodded in understanding.

"So what makes you think you are so qualified to speak on the matter, Mister Potter?" Snape asked. "Did you wake up one morning and find that all the information had implanted itself in your mind as you slept?"

Harry raised an eyebrow at his old potions professor and rolled his eyes.

“He has his own phoenix.” Ron said. “I mean, we all saw it in the hall, and it matched the feathers that Harry has been sending with his letters.”

Harry stopped staring at Snape and smiled at his friend. “You’re wrong, I’m afraid, Ron.”

“Pi, here, has discovered that he has a very close affinity with Phoenix.” Leo added with a smile. “It allows him access to some inside information about them.”

“Why do you call him Pi?” Hermione interrupted.

“We are all named after our animagus forms.” Harry said easily. “And the emblems on our uniform represents what creature we can turn into.”

Ron stared briefly at the Master’s robes. “Leo...I would say lion, but your emblem is a cat.”

Harry laughed out loud at the look on his Master’s face. “He’s a leopard.” He told Ron.

“So what are you?” Remus asked. He had leaned forward when he had heard about animagus forms, hope for company on his lonely nights clearly glinting in his eyes. “You don’t have an emblem.”

“And Pi isn’t really a name that I’d relate to any creature I know.” Hermione said. “It’s just a number.”

“And what’s special about that number?” Leo asked softly.

Hermione looked at him, and her eyes widened ever so slightly. “It an infinite number.” She said and Harry smiled at her. “It goes on forever.”

"I don't think I understand." Professor McGonagall said. She had shown a keen interest in one of her students mastering the art of animagi, and had moved forward to sit on the edge of her chair.

"I'm a multi-animagus. I can take any animal form I like." Harry said shyly.

His transfiguration teacher just stared at him. "Any creature?" she asked.

Harry smiled slightly at her expression and nodded. "Any creature." He repeated.

"Cross-species?" she asked and Harry nodded.

"Show us." Dumbledore said, also leaning forward on his chair.

Harry glanced at Leo, who gave him an encouraging smile and a light push on the shoulder as Harry stood up and stood in the centre of the circle. "Any requests?" he asked.

"Elephant." Ron immediately said.

"Oh, be realistic, Ron!" Hermione said. "It'll never fit into the office."

"Start with your first transformation, Pi." Leo said gently. "Then work your way through your favourites."

Harry nodded slightly, and took a deep breath before the sleek black panther that had been his first form appeared in the office. After a couple of moments he then turned into the wolf, causing a slight laugh to come from Remus, before turning into an eagle.

"But Pi wasn't his first name." Leo narrated, as Harry continued to change before their eyes. "It was shortened from Pyro."

"Pyro?" McGonagall asked distractedly, still staring with wide eyes as Harry turned from an eagle into a rabbit.

"That isn't an animal I've heard of." Hermione added.

"No, it means fire." Dumbledore said, his eyes never wavering as the rabbit turned into fox and met his gaze. "But the name does seem rather familiar...."

Hermione gave a small gasp, "Ron, Harry's phoenix, in his letter he said that its name was Pyro!"

Harry the fox looked at Hermione then turned into his phoenix form, sending a number of cries from those sitting around him.

Almost instantly a burst of phoenix song came from the corner and Fawkes flew over to land on the floor next to Harry. The others watched as the two phoenix greeted each other, with Harry lowering his head and opening his wings slightly in an unmistakable bow and Fawkes leaning forward to rub his crested head against Harry's neck.

After a few moments Harry turned back into his normal form, sitting cross-legged on the floor and Fawkes sang again as he fluttered up to his shoulder.

"How can this be?" McGonagall asked. Her face had taken on a pale shade and Harry momentarily worried that she wouldn't be able to take the shock.

"It returns to the matter of what we magic folk have forgotten over the years." Leo started to explain.

"Many wizards become limited to what they believe they can do, and veer away from the fear of the unknown." Harry continued, absently stroking Fawkes' chest as he monitored McGonagall's condition out of the corner of his eye. "Many take their most familiar form, something that they can easily picture in their mind such as a household pet. Others can go a bit further, and turn into something they want to be, or something they feel represents who they are. If you have enough imagination, and enough magical strength, the number of transformations you can do are endless. I still haven't mastered insects or fish yet, but to be honest I don't particularly want to." He smiled slightly, relieved to see some colour come back into

McGonagall's cheeks. "And I have a slight aversion to snakes as well."

"But, a phoenix!" McGonagall exclaimed. "A magical transformation has never been done before, and certainly not including taking on their magical powers."

Harry shrugged and leant forward slightly and placed the back of his hand against the Hogwarts' professor's face. Her eyes widened even more if it were possible. "You're really warm." She said.

Harry nodded. "People always say that you take on the characteristics of your animagus form." He said. "And it seems as if the phoenix has become part of me now."

Dumbledore nodded eagerly, and Harry was surprised to see that the headmaster had lost his look of authority and now resembled a young child who had just seen his first magic trick. "Can you understand him?" he asked, indicating Fawkes. Harry nodded and the old man's eyes began to fill with tears. "Could I be really rude and ask you to translate for us at some point? There is so much I wish I knew about that old bird."

Harry smiled and nodded. "Of course" he said. "It would be my pleasure." He looked at the phoenix as he gave a short burst of song. Harry grinned even more and looked back to Dumbledore. "He asked me to tell you that he can understand every word you speak to him, and that you ought to watch who you are calling an old bird!"

The room laughed and Fawkes shuffled his feathers before taking off from Harry's shoulder and landing on the headmaster's. "And I appreciate your friendship as well, old friend." Dumbledore said quietly, stroking the phoenix's chest much as Harry had done.

"Well, your abilities so far have astounded all of us." Remus said, his eyes filled with a glistening pride. "Surely there can't be much more?"

Harry just smiled again, and took his place on the sofa once more. "Not so much more" and he shot a glance at the man next to him as Leo let out a laugh. "But it still might take a while to tell."

"Then let us continue." Dumbledore said, summoning a plate of biscuits to the arm of his chair and picking one up to take a bite out of it.

"Well, once Pi had mastered the basics of wandless magic and animagi transformations, which actually took remarkably less time than I thought." Leo said with a smile. "He then went under the direction of a colleague of mine who deals with combat training." Harry muttered something under his breath and Leo nodded his head in agreement.

"I'm afraid we didn't catch that, Mister Potter." Snape said, his voice icy but his eyes were soft.

"I believe you watched his passing in Hogsmead the other day." Leo said. "He was the one that Pi defeated with the sword."

"You killed one of your own teachers?" Hermione gasped.

"He never taught me anything other than to watch my back." Harry replied coldly and looked over at Snape. "I'd say our relationship was like a pair of lovebirds in comparison to that of Orson and myself."

"Orson?" Remus asked. "A bear! Fitting name. That guy was almost as big as Hagrid."

"You got along well, then?" Snape asked, his eyebrows raised slightly, and Harry was slightly amused to see a slight blush grace the cheeks of the potion master's normally expressionless face. He smiled inwardly as he realised that Snape would have no need to act out a lie now his true loyalties had been revealed and he was no longer part of Voldemort's circle, but some habits were just too hard to break.

"Hardly." Leo said. "Pyro annoyed the hell out of him. Orson saw Pi as a threat and so tried to suppress his talents before they could surpass his."

"But a couple of the Masters had already seen what I was capable of, and after being used a pin cushion in my first session I was convinced to start training by myself."

"They made an inexperienced student like yourself fight against students who knew what they were doing?" McGonagall asked. "That's preposterous! You could've been killed!"

"That's the way the school works." Leo said. "Maybe not always to that degree, you'll find that most of the masters actually teach their students something before putting them in a fight. But you do have to defeat another in a fight before you can progress. As the first level it's simply the number of touches per dueller, then it moves onto whoever draws first blood. We then start to add magic to the duels and the winner is the one who can disarm their opponent in such a way they cannot continue to fight. This often leads to injury or death."

"But that's barbaric!" Hermione exclaimed.

"It's the way it has always been." Leo raised his voice in defence of his school, but it dropped as he looked at Harry. "Though I feel that might be about to change."

"Explain." Dumbledore prompted.

"In our school you can only progress onto a limit you are happy with." Leo said and Harry suddenly found his nails interesting as lowered his head and played with his hands. "After a while you meet your match. We don't normally set lesser students against those more advanced unless in training bouts. Orson was an exception, especially with those students he didn't like. Many students leave the school with a sound knowledge of duelling, but with no desire to go further. Others, like Orson and myself, take on the larger challenge of becoming a Master and duel one of the tutors of the school. If we win, then we are offered a teaching post. From the position of tutor there is only one place you can go..."

“And that is?” Ron prompted. Harry glanced up at his friend and smiled slightly as he saw the childhood eagerness in his eyes, much like that he had seen in Dumbledore earlier.

“Doyen.” Leo replied, sending a glance towards Harry. “Like your headmaster, he runs the school and stays in charge until another challenges him and wins. I realised I had reached my limit as a tutor. I am pleased with who I am and what I have achieved, and I am quite happy to continue training new students. I have no desire to go further. Orson, on the other hand, had the ambition for the top slot, and would do anything to get it.”

“So this Orson person killed your Doyen?” Remus asked.

“Not exactly.” Harry said, taking up the story. “As I said before, I had started to train solo. I was running long distances every day, wielding a blade and shadow fighting on my own. I came across a duelling platform marked in the ground on the banks of a lake by the school and worked on my footwork there. Orson continued to treat me as an inferior, and I never let onto my progress. Not until the beginning of November that is.”

“What happened then?” Ron asked.

“I was approached by the Doyen himself. He had been watching me for sometime and was amazed to see me Dancing...”

Ron snorted as he looked at his friend. “Dancing?” he laughed. “Never thought you had it in you, Harry.”

“Not that sort of dancing.” Harry said patiently. “This is Dancing with a sword. It’s called the Dance of Death. A very over-dramatic name, I know, but only very advanced duellers can perform it. It’s like a instinctive routine of moves and when you pick up a blade to practise its all you want to do, over and over, until it is right.”

“But what does it symbolise?” McGonagall asked.

“A duel.” Leo replied. “Probably to the death. Its like something is teaching you the moves in advance. If you listen carefully enough and

practise these moves until they are seamless and feel right, then you are likely to finish victorious.”

“Are all these Dances the same?” Dumbledore asked, clearly interested in the new subject he did not know about.

“No, they are individual to the person and the battle they are to fight.” Leo replied.

“Have you had to use this yet, Harry?” Remus asked, a worried frown on his forehead.

“No.” Harry replied. “Its still not right. But it’s feeling more and more natural all the time, especially now I’ve got my new sword...”

“New sword?” Hermione looked pale in the firelight and Harry nodded slightly. He had thrown himself into training over the past week, finding it therapeutic to repeat the moves and clear his mind of what had happened, and the Dance was beginning to feel much more complete now that he had the Doyen’s blade.

“So once you showed this Dance to the Doyen, he wanted to train you, right?” Ron asked, trying once more to guess where the story was headed.

“Not exactly.” Harry said patiently. “He asked me if I had ever wanted to make water move.” He smiled at the blank looks his statement had produced.

“Make water move?” Snape asked. “What type of question is that, Potter?”

“Its what he asked me.” Harry defended himself. “He said that for a long time he had been waiting for someone like me to come along. A very long time. That guy was nearly two hundred years old, and he refused to give up on life until another like him had come along for him to instruct.”

“Instruct in what?” Remus asked.

"The elements." Harry replied, and once more the room fell silent, broken this time by Harry who went on to explain. "It's a power that allows you to control the four elements of fire, air, water and earth."

"We know what an elemental is, Potter." Snape snapped. "But you?"

Harry nodded. "That's what I thought when I found out." He said. "It kinda makes sense in a way, if you think back to what happened back at Privet Drive. That type of power couldn't have come from nothing. He didn't really explain what he was doing at the time, just said that I had a gift and that it was his duty to awaken it. Next thing I know he had grabbed me and I experienced the most intense pain before blacking out."

"And this was at the beginning of November?" Dumbledore asked, his fingers steeped once more in front of his face.

"The earthquake." McGonagall whispered, leaning back into her chair.

Leo nodded. "I guessed the whole of the magical community would have felt it." he said, and Harry looked at him, slightly startled.

"You caused that?" Ron asked Harry who shrugged.

"I guess," he said "though I don't remember it at the time. When I woke up I was still in the forest, realised I was late for class and ran back to the school where I was set up against Orson's top student as a punishment..."

"What happened?" Remus asked as Harry fell silent.

Harry hesitated and stared into the fire. The sparkle that had been in his eyes at the beginning of the evening had disappeared and was now replaced with a distant pain.

"The boy died." Leo said quietly.

"How?" Ron asked in the same tone of voice, but he already suspected the answer.

"I killed him." Harry said. "I don't really know what happened. I've been working hard at keeping my temper, but Orson got me angry. He knew who I was. I know it's hardly like I could really keep it a secret, not with this scar on my head, but the boys in the dormitory had heard me dream, about Sirius, and Cedric... He started taunting me, then set one of his more advanced students onto me. One of my friends passed me a sword to defend myself with, and I just let it control me... he barely lasted five minutes."

"What happened then?" but Harry, still staring at the flames, was unsure who had asked the question.

"I ran." Harry said with a catch in his throat. He could remember the fear he had felt as he saw the blood on his blade and the body oozing life in front of him. "I ran to the only place no one knew about; down by the lake where I had been training. I realised that I had become a trained killer, and even though I knew this was what I had wanted, what was needed to kill Voldemort, I was still disgusted with myself. I swore that I would not fight again unless it was against Him." He sighed and Remus was sure he could see the boy's emerald eyes filling up with tears. "But I guess I broke that promise the other day."

"You killed again?" Hermione asked.

"The guy in Hogsmead, remember?" Ron said and his girlfriend nodded slightly.

"How did Voldemort get involved with that fight?" Dumbledore asked.

"The Doyen trained me with the elements. Mainly he taught me techniques of concentration and control, the basic of most, if not all wandless magic. Then Christmas came, and after I had returned from here he called me to his quarters where he was lying in bed. Leo was there, and...." He hesitated before taking a gulp before continuing. "He said he had fulfilled his life's purpose, and that there was nothing more he could teach me. Now it was time for him to move on. He told me that I was to take his place. That I was to become Doyen."

"You're the Doyen?" Ron asked unbelievably.

“Yes. Well, will be.” Harry reached over his shoulder and Hermione and Ron frowned as he seemed to clench his hand around midair. Their expressions changed rapidly as he pulled a large katana from out of nowhere and showed it to the others.

“Orson wasn’t too happy with the news that the Masters would run the school until I was able to take over,” Harry continued, gently turning the blade so that it caught the light from the fire. “Especially when he learned that the Doyen’s death had been natural and not forced. He challenged me, and ended up killing his own daughter...”

Those in the room could tell that Harry was struggling to keep his emotions in check as his voice cracked slightly. Leo reached out to put his hand on the boy’s shoulder and Fawkes trilled a few mournful notes from the other side of the room.

“Kat was brought up at the school by her father after her mother died by accident.” Leo explained softly as Harry fought to control his emotions. “She was a wonderful girl, and almost like a daughter to me. She and Pyro became pretty close in the time he spent at Marcello. I’d never seen her happier than when she was with Pi.”

Harry took a deep breath, absorbing the strength provided by the phoenix song and swiping at his eyes angrily. “I was too shocked to do anything about it.” he said in a self-accusatory voice. “Kat was dead; she had tried to protect me from her father and died in my arms. Before I knew what was happening Orson had pulled out an amulet of the Dark Mark and portkeyed me away to Voldemort. I wasn’t there for very long. I called upon the earth element, threw everyone off balance, then apparated to the school where you saw me come into the hall. You know what happened after that.”

“But you were gravely injured.” McGonagall said. “That amount of wounds could not have been made in a short time. Not even in Voldemort’s circle.”

“They were already there.” Harry explained, finally winning the battle over the control of his emotions. “Avery simply used his Laceratus Restoro curse on me again. In that instant everything reopened.”

“And your remarkable healing...?” Remus asked. “I left you for dead in the hospital wing.”

Harry nodded. “Another trait of the phoenix.” He said. “I doubt I’d experience a burning day like Fawkes over there, but I am able to heal myself in short times, providing I get rest and especially if I transform.”

Silence fell over those in the room as they digested what Harry had said. Then Snape looked up at Leo. “You came with a large number of your students. Why?”

Leo gave a nod towards Harry. “Technically, they are his students.” He said. “Even though I might be taking charge of them for now, he is my superior. I may have more experience, but the boy has amazing abilities and I would follow him anywhere.

“When he arrived back with Orson’s body a lot of the student’s made their loyalties known. Some chose to stay and continue to train with the remaining Masters, happily ignorant that another world exists. Some went straight to Voldemort, apparently they had been planning to do so with Orson for sometime. The rest knew Kat, and were devastated when her own father killed her. They are the boys that are downstairs, and all are willing to fight alongside Pyro.”

“And we’ll need them.” Harry added sombrely. “If Voldemort has Marcello students on his side then we are going to need other Marcello students to fight them. Aurors wouldn’t stand a chance,”

Leo smirked. “And we’d be a definite help against the Death Eaters.” He added.

“You were the mysterious strangers in Diagon Alley that afternoon!” Remus said.

“You were there?” Harry asked quickly.

Remus stared at him. “Were you?”

Harry nodded. "Sheridan... that was the dramatic one with the sword earlier... he knocked me out in training and I had a vision of Voldemort initiating the attack. I couldn't let him kill everyone there, so I convinced Leo to let us go and help."

"We were wondering who you were." Hermione said.

"We couldn't reveal ourselves." Leo explained. "I was breaking a number of rules taking them in the first place, the last thing we needed was to let the whole world know about Marcello's existence. But, as a wise student once told me, what's point of learning to duel if you don't get the chance to use it for what you believe?"

Dumbledore nodded. "I'm sure we'll appreciate any help you can give us." He said. "I will call a meeting of the Order within the next couple of days. Maybe you could go through what your students are capable of with them? And we can sort out some sort of plan." He smiled slightly. "I feel that many of them will be most relieved to see you as well, Harry."

Harry nodded slightly and gave a sigh. "Well, I think that's about all I have to tell you." he said. "I don't think I have any more surprises."

"Was that it?" Snape asked, but there was a smile on his face as he spoke.

Harry shrugged. "I have a lot more I can talk about," he said. "But most of it is about my research as Pyro, and what I have found out about phoenix in general. I have a few findings that would interest you, Professor." He said, nodding at Snape, "As well as some things that might help the writing of your next book, sir." He said to Dumbledore.

The headmaster nodded with a smile. "And I will welcome that chat whenever you are free, Harry." He said. "But I would guess that we are all pretty tired after all that, and maybe we should adjourn for the night and meet up again sometime tomorrow?"

The group stood and started making the way to the door.

“Where are you sleeping tonight, Harry?” Ron asked. “Your bed is still waiting for you in Gryffindor if you want to come back with us.”

Harry’s knowing eyes smiled at him, but he looked towards Leo for permission before saying anything.

“Go.” Leo said. “You’ve been wanting to come back for so long now. I’m sure we can survive a night without you.”

Harry nodded. “I’ll show you to where the students are first.” He said. “And help you make sure they are all settled.” He looked back at Hermione and Ron. “I’ll meet you up there, is that okay?”

Ron nodded and placed his hand on Harry’s shoulder before he smiled and shook his head. “I just can’t believe you’re finally back, mate.” He said.

“Don’t be long.” Hermione added, and the two of them walked out of the door and down the stairs.

* * * * *

Chapter 43: The new Harry

Harry grinned widely as he saw Ron and Hermione leaning against the wall next to the portrait of the fat lady. At least it solved the problem of him getting into the common room without a password, though he knew that he could've easily entered by a number of means.

"Now that is the Harry Potter we all know and love." Ron said with a grin.

Harry looked down at himself. He had taken the time after seeing the other Marcello students to have a quick shower and get changed, feeling somewhat nervous about meeting all his friends again after so long. He was now dressed in a long white-sleeved shirt that covered the pale scarring on his forearms, with some dark worn jeans. His hair, still wet, had been pulled back into a high ponytail, though his shorter bangs still fell into his face.

"You mean I didn't look like me before?" he asked.

"You looked well weird, mate." Ron said with a small shake of his head. "What with all those battle robes, and then you went and pulled out that sword..." he hesitated. "Do you still have it on you?"

Harry laughed. "Not really" he said. "Though it'll always be there when I need it."

Ron frowned slightly but Hermione just smiled at her boyfriend's expression. "But now you look like Harry again!" she said. "Even if you are a bit taller... with longer hair... and your eyes really stand out now you don't wear those thick glasses anymore..."

Ron started to stare at her, and Hermione gave her boyfriend an innocent look, before winking at Harry. "...You're just as skinny as ever though." She finished.

Harry laughed as she pulled Ron's head closer to hers and gave him a quick peck on the cheek causing him to blush slightly. "And what

did happen to your glasses?" she asked as she turned back to her friend.

Harry shrugged. "Just didn't need them any more." He said. "Probably a good thing, as they didn't make the journey with me to Marcello. I never really noticed until I woke up one morning and started searching for them. I haven't thought about them since." He looked up at the portrait who was staring down at them and dabbing a white laced handkerchief at her eyes. "And how are you doing milady?" he asked with a small bow that made the fat lady blush and hide her face behind the lace.

"A charmer as always." She said with a smile. "Just like your father."

Harry raised his eyebrows. "Now there's something I haven't heard for a while." He mused aloud. He looked at his friends questioning looks and shrugged again. "I guess it has been nice not to have to live up to anyone else's name." He explained.

Ron pulled a face. "Yeah, well I still have to escape that." He said.

Harry clapped a hand against his friends' shoulder. "You are prefect, Quidditch captain, all you need is head boy and you're one up on all your brothers."

Ron snorted. "As if I'd get that with you back." He muttered.

Harry stared intently at his friend, trying to gage his mood before continuing. "Ron, I'm not coming back to Hogwarts to learn. I have learnt all I need at Marcello, and everything else will come from going out into the big, wide world and experiencing it all for myself." He grinned as Ron started thinking about that.

"You're not coming back?" Hermione asked.

Harry shook his head. "Other than the fact that I now have my own school to run, I also have a rather large confrontation with an evil dark wizard to look forward to." His face fell a little bit. "Who knows what is going to happen with that?"

Hermione looked at him. "You don't seem as upset about that as I'd imagined." She said.

Harry smiled, looking slightly wistful. "I not pretending that there aren't risks involved." He said. "I know fully well what's at stake. But if there is one thing that Marcello has taught me, that is to live for the moment and to enjoy things as they are. Bad things will happen, they always do. You just have to ride with them." He looked up at his friends. "And I think you two should remember that as well."

Hermione's breath hitched in her chest as she saw the seriousness in Harry's eyes. Ron just shook his head. "You aren't going to leave us, mate." He said. "We won't let you."

"Not again, anyway." Hermione added.

Harry smiled and pulled his friends into a quick hug. "Thanks." He muttered, not wanting to tell them of the type of thoughts that had planted themselves steadfastly in his mind. He took a deep breath and looked up at the entrance to the Gryffindor common room again. "So are we going to go in? Or are we going to stay out here talking all night?" he asked.

Ron smiled and said the password, but hesitated before pushing the entrance open. "You ready for this?" he asked.

Harry frowned warily. "How much did you tell them?"

"Only that you were back." Hermione replied. "They wanted to know who all those boys were and why we were allowed up to the meeting when most people weren't. We refused to tell them anything else."

Harry nodded. "Sounds good." He said. "I'm sure you two realise that most of what I told you has to be kept secret until I meet Voldemort?"

Both Ron and Hermione nodded. "Of course." Hermione said, and reached past Ron to push at the portrait.

"Harry!" Harry was barely able to prepare himself as Ginny leapt forward into his arms. "You're back!"

He laughed and spun her around in a small circle, carrying her weight easily. As soon as he had put her down the rest of the common room were instantly crowded around Harry, firing questions at him and trying to shake his hand or hug him.

“Alright! Alright!” Harry laughed, holding his hands up in the air at his friends. “Give me some room and I’ll do some explaining!”

“We were beginning to wonder when you were coming back.” Neville said, as the group followed Harry over to the large fireplace. Harry turned his back to the flames, taking a moment to close his eyes and feel their reassuring presence before looking back over the room.

“We were really worried about you.” Ginny said.

“All this time?” Harry asked with a smile as Dean wrapped his arm protectively around her waist.

Ginny looked up at her boyfriend and turned a little red. “Well...” she said with a shrug.

Harry laughed easily again.

“What happened, Harry?” Dean asked. “We all heard that you had escaped from You-Know-Who, but other than that no one has told us anything.”

Harry smiled. “That’s probably because that is all they knew.” He explained.

“Well, you certainly don’t look like you’ve been hiding out all this time.” Lavender said who was sitting with Parvati Patil. Both were looking at Harry appreciatively. “Where have you been?”

Harry blushed slightly and glanced around the room before replying. He noticed a couple of non-Gryffindor faces, particularly those who had been in the DA when he had run it. He supposed that they had been notified of his return and had been allowed in the common room especially.

He took a deep breath. "There's just so much to say." He said with another grin. "Basically, though, I ended up at another school, where they specialise in teaching boys how to fight..."

He spent the best part of the next half hour explaining about Marcello and what the students learnt there. He left out a lot of details, limiting his new abilities to only the wolf animagi form, his wandless magic and his sword skills. He had many of the girls giggling behind their hands when he had performed a demonstration of his wandless magic by lifting one of the sofas they were sitting on into the air, and had willingly pulled the katana out of the air for them to see, though warned them about the dangers of touching it.

After a while he stretched slightly, flexing his hands behind his back and causing the flames in the hearth behind him to flare up a little. "Any questions?" he asked, feeling as if he had just given a lecture.

There were various shakes of heads around the room and Harry mentally heaved a sigh of relief. He saw Hermione and Ron send a smile his way, and the male Weasley sent a glance to the stairs leading up to the dormitories.

Harry nodded in acknowledgement. "Well," he said, "If that's all, I'm going to head off to bed. It's been quite a long day."

There was a general motion to stand as people came to say goodnight to him, a few cracking jokes about not disappearing again by morning. Soon only his closest friends were left in the common room, and Harry fell onto one of the sofas with a sigh.

"Well, that went better than expected." He said, leaning back and closing his eyes.

Ron stretched out beside Hermione on one of the sofas. "And how did you expect it to go?" he asked.

Harry thought for a moment before answering. "I wasn't really expecting to have to do it on my own." He said in a monotone.

“Oh?” Ginny asked from next to Dean. “Why?”

Harry shrugged. “I had a friend at Marcello.” He said. “Yes, a female friend. And yes, we were close.” He confirmed as a number of his friends sent him questioning looks.

“Ooh, Cho won’t be happy.” Seamus said with a laugh. “You were all she talked about when you went missing from the Medical Wing that night, and did you see her face when you came in the common room?” he chuckled slightly.

“When’s your friend coming, Harry?” Ginny asked.

“She’s not.” Harry replied. “She died the morning of the day that I appeared in the Great Hall. It’s really because of her that I’ve come back so soon. I just didn’t want to stay at that school any longer than I had to.”

The others fell silent in shock, only Hermione and Ron had heard about Kat and neither were sure whether they should break the silence.

Eventually Hermione spoke up, sliding her hands around her neck and pulling out her pendant. “What are these?” she asked Harry, who looked up at her with glistening eyes.

Harry smiled. “They are both phoenix, Hermione,” he said with a smile.

She rolled her eyes at him. “I know that,” she said. “I meant what’s the stone. We showed them to Dumbledore, but he didn’t know. And we also tried to do some research on them in the library, but couldn’t find anything that resembled the substance inside it.”

Harry shook his head, sending a quick glance around the people in the room before carefully answering. “You wouldn’t find much.” He said. “I did a bit of research on phoenix when I was at Marcello, and there is a sample of phoenix blood in each of those stones. In fact, they are probably the only two of three samples ever willingly given

by a phoenix. If you know how to trigger the magic in them, then they can do pretty much anything you want them to."

"Such as?" Hermione asked.

Harry shrugged. "You could use them as a homing beacon of sorts, or if you broke the stone you could use the blood much in the same way as phoenix tears, though it is a lot more potent."

"So you were keeping tabs on us, then?" Ron asked.

His friend smiled. "I just wanted to know I could find you if Voldemort ever got it into his head to whisk you away." He said. "I don't know what I would do if I lost anyone else."

The room fell into silence again, this time broken by Neville. "You'd keep going." He said, then explained further. "You may not want to, but you would."

Harry smiled at him, noting that the short, chubby boy he once knew was rapidly catching him up in height and was beginning to lose the roundness of youth. "I suppose I would." He said, and looked at Hermione. "I guess that "saving people thing" won't ever really disappear."

Hermione didn't blush this time, but met his gaze fully. "You'll never change," she said with a smile and a small shake of her head.

"Well, I'm beat." Ron announced, kissing Hermione on the head and pushing himself to the edge of his chair. "At least the weekend starts tomorrow. Means we can lie in as long as we like!"

Harry shook his head. "I'll probably be up before daybreak." He said. "I've been up at that time every morning to train since the middle of summer, and I fully suspect that I'll up around at that time again tomorrow. I'll probably head down to the lake and do some training before breakfast..." his voice dropped away as he looked at the expressions on his friends faces. "What?" he asked.

“You’re going to go out, at that time of the morning, to train?” Ron asked incredulously. Harry nodded and Ron shook his head. “Rather you than me, mate.” He said.

“Well, you are welcome to come down and watch if you like.” Harry said. “I’m pretty sure some of my friends will be up before breakfast as well. You can come and see what sort of things I’ve been doing these past few months.”

Hermione nodded. “That would be great.” She said, and nudged her boyfriend. “Won’t it, Ron?”

Ron looked anything but enthusiastic. “I guess,” he muttered.

Harry laughed. “Just come down when you wake up.” He said. “We’ll probably be training throughout the day. Just because we aren’t at Marcello doesn’t mean that we can afford to let our skills go rusty.”

Ginny stifled a yawn and started heading for the stairs, giving Harry one last hug before she left. “I’ll probably wander down after breakfast, then.” She said. “I’m exhausted.”

Harry nodded. “See you there.” He said and followed Ron up the stairs into the boys’ dormitory.

Ron awoke in the morning to find someone painfully jabbing at his shoulder. He mumbled some insults at the intruder before digging his head underneath his pillow, blocking the sound of his name being whispered softly.

He was just about aware of someone saying his name frustratedly before his pillow was snatched away and rudely used to pummel him over the head.

He twisted onto his elbow, ready to shout at the person who was disturbing his sleep when he bit his tongue. Hermione was standing there, dressed in black trousers and a thick jumper. She had her warmest cloak hung over one arm, and Ron’s pillow was still in her hands raised ready for another swipe at her boyfriend. “Are you

awake now?" she asked innocently, lowering the feather-filled weapon.

Ron grumbled slightly, finishing with something that sounded like "What are you doing here?"

"Harry's already left." Hermione told him. "I figured you would want to go and see what he's been getting up to these past few months."

Ron frowned and looked at his watch, which he kept next to his pillow. "It's just gone six!" he exclaimed, and Hermione shushed him as a grunt was heard from one of the other beds.

"There's no need to tell everyone." She said. "I don't think they'd appreciate being woken up at this time on a Saturday morning."

Ron raised an eyebrow at her. "No? Really?" he asked, but sighed as she looked hurt.

"Fine." She said, pausing dramatically before continuing. "I'll go down by myself then. I shall see you at breakfast."

Ron rolled his eyes and turned over to watch his girlfriend walk to the door. "Wait, Hermione." He said, pulling back his blankets and swinging his legs over the edge of his bed. "Give me a few minutes to wake up, and I'll meet you in the common room."

In the dark he saw a bright flash as Hermione smiled at him. "See you in a bit then." She said cheerfully, and exited the room.

"Completely smitten." He heard Dean mumble sleepily from his bed, and Ron felt an elated swell of triumph when he heard a quiet "oomph" as his pillow connected with his friend's head.

Ron tried to stifle a yawn as he followed Hermione down the stairs in the entrance hall of Hogwarts. She looked at him and smiled apologetically. "I'm sorry." She said. "I just really wanted to see all this new stuff he says he's learnt."

Ron smiled at her and put his arm around her waist. "It's okay." He said. "It's just that we were up talking till pretty late last night."

Hermione nodded. "I should've realised that I suppose." She said, and hesitated on the bottom stair as she noticed a number of other people already standing in front of the doors.

She recognised the headmaster, Remus, Snape and Leo, and assumed that the other boys were all students from Marcello.

The headmaster greeted them with a smile. It never ceased to amaze Ron that the older wizard could make a smile seem so genuine, no matter what time of day or night it was, and tried once again to shake the sleepiness from his head as the headmaster started to speak.

"Ronald, Hermione," he welcomed them by name as a means of introduction. "You remember Leo from last night, and these are some of Harry's friends from Marcello."

One of the boys stepped forward, and Hermione recognised him as being one of the boys who had flanked Leo the day before.

"It's great to finally meet you." he said, shaking hands with both Ron and Hermione. "We've certainly heard a fair bit about you from Pyro. I'm Horus, another Master at the school."

Hermione raised an eyebrow. "There seems to be a lot of young people running this school." She said dubiously, for Horus didn't look that much older than herself and Ron.

The boys laughed and another stepped forward. "We work on achievement levels." He said. "Once we successfully complete one level, we move on. That way we don't have to wait for end of year exams if we are already surpassed that skill level." He held out his hand. "Conway." He introduced himself. "And we also have Sheridan, Brogan, Todd, and Brandon."

"We've spent a lot of time training with Pi over the past few months." Brogan said. "Both he and Kat are... were very good friends of ours."

Hermione and Ron glanced at each other in the saddened silence that followed, before Ron spoke up. "Are you all here to train as well?" he asked.

Todd shook his head. "No. We've come to watch Pyro train, just like you. We know what he's capable of in our team practises, but we have never seen him train solo. Leo tells us it is quite a sight to see."

The boy called Sheridan nodded in agreement. "I'm particularly interested in seeing his moves." He said with a smirk, and stumbled slightly as Brandon gave him a shove. "Hey!"

Leo smiled at his students' antics. "Well, we better head off." He said. "Else we might miss something." And led the way out the main doors and across the cool grass towards the lake.

"Where is he?" Ron asked when they had reached the water's edge.

Horus' sharp eyes pointed out a small clearing about a third of the way around the lake. "He's over there." He said, and the others watched to see a small flare of light, as if a match had just been struck.

A few moments later, the others could see Harry more clearly as he lit a number of torches around the clearing. He was close enough that they could see the expressions on his face, but it was evident from his movements that he was either not aware of their presence or was not directly acknowledging them.

"His strongest element is fire." Leo explained to the group. "But an elemental is not able to control anything that is magically created. Conjured elements just don't behave in the same way as the real thing." He smiled to himself. "If he is lighting torches, then I would assume that he'll be doing some elemental training this morning. I think he suspects that he is being watched."

Hermione nodded. "He actually asked some of us if we wanted to come down last night." She said.

Todd chuckled. "I never knew that Pi was such a show off." He said.

“What’s he doing now?” Ron asked.

“He’s doing some stretches.” Conway replied from beside him. “He’s probably already done his morning run, and is just stretching down before he starts his other routines.”

Ron shook his head. “And he used to complain about early Quidditch practises.” He said and the others next to him smiled.

“I guess some people change.” Remus said, staring in wonder at the son of his dead friend as he stretched.

“Doesn’t he get cold?” Hermione asked, shivering in the early morning breeze. Harry was only wearing his combat trousers and a vest top, leaving his arms bare.

“Nah.” Todd replied, “He’s probably got some sort of wandless heating charm on the area.”

Dumbledore looked to the potions professors next to him. “You’ll have to remind me to return his wand at some point today.” He said.

Snape just looked at the headmaster. “If he can do half of what he told us last night, then will he really need it?” he asked.

“Probably not.” Leo replied, causing both men to look at him. “His studies with the elements has produced a high level of control over his magic, and because of this he should have the same amount of control over his wandless magic as he would with a wand, and even more-so I would suspect. Without a wand he can manipulate higher intensities of magic, such as he does with the elements. I doubt any wand would be able to cope with that now.”

Remus nodded. “His phoenix feather core certainly had trouble accommodating the level of power he showed at his relatives house over the summer.” He said. “It became so hot we couldn’t touch it.”

“Phoenix feather?” Leo asked, and the professor nodded. Leo shook his head slightly and looked back across the lake. “It makes a strange sort of sense.” He admitted.

Suddenly, Sheridan started clapping his hands together excitedly. “Now this is what we’ve come here to see.” He said.

“What is?” Hermione asked.

“His Dance,” Brandon said, a gleam of anticipation in his eyes.

“We saw it once a couple of days after he had first found it.” Conway explained. “But we haven’t seen it since he’s been able to complete it.”

“And certainly not with Kudos.” Horus added.

“Kudos?” Lupin asked.

“His sword.” Todd replied.

“It has a name?” Ron and Hermione glanced at each other, not really understanding the cause for excitement in the Marcello students. Leo was a lot calmer, but even he had a similar expression of anticipation on his face.

The Hogwarts students stole a glance at their Defence teacher, but Lupin just shrugged and turned his attention back to the lit area on the banks of the lake, where Harry had taken out his katana and was doing a few warm up swings.

As they watched, Harry stopped and straightened up, pulling his shoulders back and raising his head. He then dropped into a duelling stance, one foot placed behind the other so that he was balanced with the katana raised in front of him; a silent challenge to an invisible opponent.

Before a second had passed, Harry had started his Dance, moving with a speed and agility as he deflected, thrust and literally danced around the torch-lit clearing. His body created flickering shadows

against the trees that gave his observers the impression that there were a large number of people performing some sort of ritualistic dance around him.

“He’s certainly one for the dramatic.” Snape murmured from the end of the line, but most ignored the comment due to the level of awe they could hear in his voice.

It really was a majestic sight. They could see that there was a strange sense lack of emotion on Harry’s face as he concentrated on the moves. Hermione was momentarily distracted as one of the Marcello students started chanting “C’m on, c’mon.” under his breath, but her attention was once more grabbed as Harry bent backwards, his feet leaving the ground and passing over his head in the prefect flip. Within seconds the Dance was finished, and Harry was once more knelt with one knee on the ground, the blade held flat against the floor in front of him.

“Yes!” Hermione looked to her right again to see the Marcello students nodding in respect of his moves, large grins on their faces. She looked to her left and met Ron’s gaze as he stared at her slightly dazed.

“Wow.” He said with a whisper, and his girlfriend nodded in agreement.

The other teachers were all staring across the lake, unmoving as they watched Harry stand and walk to the edge of the clearing, where he picked up his jumper to wipe the sweat of his face.

He made his way back to centre of the clearing and started swinging the blade again, though this time he didn’t seem to be performing the full Dance.

“What’s he doing now?” Lupin asked Leo, not taking his eyes of the boy in front of him.

“Practising the bits that didn’t go right.” Leo replied, and smiled at the frown that appeared on the werewolf’s face. “It takes a long time to

perfect the Dance.” He said. “Pyro has done really well with it, but he still doesn’t think its perfect yet.”

“Three guesses at the bit which he doesn’t like.” They heard Todd mutter from the other end of the line.

They watched as Harry swung the blade and then bent his back again, this time performing the flip in slow motion. He brought his legs up above his head and held them there, shuffling his hands around on the floor and moving the katana until it was in a position under his right palm that felt comfortable.

He brought his legs back down so that he was standing in the original position again, then repeated the move, aiming to put his hands in the position he had found comfortable before. After a couple of repetitions of this he performed the last few moves before the flip up to speed and performed the manoeuvre easily, bringing the katana up in front of him, and paced forward to perform the final swing.

He once again paused before standing and letting Kudos disappear from sight once more. He then sat himself down on his heels facing the water and his audience could see him close his eyes, calming himself before moving onto his next routine.

“His elements?” Lupin asked Leo who was standing by his right shoulder.

Leo nodded. “They require a large degree of concentration to prevent them getting out of hand. He has pretty much mastered the control of one element at a time, though he isn’t as strong with the earth and water elements as he is with air and fire. He has recently been able to control fire and air together, though, which can produce quite a show if he is so inclined.”

“In which case, why are we still standing?” Dumbledore asked with a smile. He pulled out his wand and conjured up a line of sofas, which had a charm on them to make them feel warm to the touch. He also conjured up a small bowl of sweets and passed them down the line as they waited for Harry to start his elemental training.

After a short while, they noticed Harry raise a hand in the direction of one of the torches, his tongue flicking out to wet his lips before he took on an intense look of concentration as he focused on the flame.

Hermione couldn't help but groan when the flame snuffed out, and could sense the disappointment in the other Marcello students when the image of Harry disappeared into the darkness.

Leo, however, was chuckling slightly. And soon they could see Harry's face glowing surreally from below as he opened the hand that had been resting lightly on his stomach, revealing a small ball of flame.

"It's his favourite trick." Leo explained as they watched Harry get to his feet, the ball of flame still happily nestling in his palm. "He found that if he focuses on the heat of the fire rather than on the flame itself, then he is able to manipulate it a lot more."

"How does he do it?" Dumbledore asked, fascinated by Harry's movements as the dark-haired boy bent to place the flaming ball on the ground, and stepping back. The group flinched as the fire suddenly soared into the sky, creating a twenty foot column of heat before dying away to match Harry's height.

"By concentrating on the heat, he is able to disperse it enough to not be a flame anymore, yet still control it enough to be able to remould it back into a flame." Leo said. "That's how he was able to move it from the torch to his hand without you seeing it move."

"But couldn't he just produce fire on a normal sunny day?" Hermione asked. "A bit like solar panels?" The wizards around her gave her confused looks and she just shook her head in return. "Forget that." She said with a sigh.

Leo frowned at her, but tried to explain. "He might be able to do it if he had something to focus the sun's energy with." He said. "Like a lens of some sort. But I don't think he'll ever have the ability to pull fire out of nothing."

They continued to watch Harry manipulate the fire tower with occasional comments from Leo until the sky began to lighten and the effect of the flames against the darkness was lost. They watched, fascinated, as Harry cupped the flame in his hands and gently replaced back onto the top of the torch, then took the torch to the water to snuff out the flame.

“He has to respect the elements.” Leo responded to the unasked question. “After manipulating something like fire, and giving it part of your own magical focus to make it perform like that, you can’t just expect to blow it out like you would a candle. That would just release it from its restraints and can cause a serious amount of damage. Many elementals have lost their lives by becoming too complacent at the end of their practises.”

Harry knelt at the lakeside, scooping up a small handful of water in his hands before glancing up in the direction of where his audience sat with a smirk on his face.

Sheridan, Horus, Todd and Leo immediately stood up and jumped over the back of the sofas, leaving the others staring confusedly after them. Ron turned back to look at his friend. He noticed the elemental make eye contact with him and give a quick wink before pulling his hands apart, sending a shower of water droplets into the surface of the still lake.

Instantly, a large splash of water erupted in front of where the others were still sat, as if something large and heavy had been dropped from a great height into the water. Hermione squealed and the others gave shouts of alarm as they were covered with a fine spray of water. Behind them, the two Marcello students and the two Masters laughed, having correctly anticipated Harry’s moves by the expression on his face.

“That’ll teach you never to mess with an elemental!” Sheridan said with a laugh.

The Hogwarts students shook their clothes to remove the droplets as the staff members performed quick drying charms on themselves.

Snape had a sour expression on his face, Remus was chuckling softly, and the headmaster had his usual twinkle in his eyes.

“Oh, he so deserves a punishment for that!” Brandon said, readjusting his robes after drying them.

Brogan looked across the lake at the now dark clearing. “Where is he?” he asked.

“I think he’s headed back round.” Todd said, daring to come a bit closer now the company was mostly dry.

Conway smirked, “Leave him to me.” He said, and disappeared into the dark shadows beneath the trees that lined part of the bank.

Ron stared curiously after him, but after a quick nudge from Sheridan he turned his attention to the path along which Harry would arrive and tried to mimic the innocent expressions of the Marcello students.

He didn’t have to wait long for Harry to appear. He had put his jumper on and had a big grin on his face as he approached. As soon as he came within hearing distance, however, he paused, his smile disappearing from his face and his head cocked to one side as if he was anticipating something. Without any further warning, he ducked low as the shadowy form of a large wolf flew from the bushes in an attack.

The wolf had not anticipated Harry’s evasion and consequently overshot it’s goal, skidding across the path as it fought to regain balance enough to change its direction and attempt another charge at the boy.

Harry, now aware of who it was attacking him, didn’t give Conway the chance to regain his composure. Instead, he turned into another wolf and directed his own charge at his assailant, taking the offensive and connecting with the side of the first animagus, sending them into the bushes in a snarling ball of teeth-slashing fur.

The Marcello boys cheered and followed the two through the bushes and onto another path the other side, those from Hogwarts following with mixed emotions behind.

It wasn't long before the dogfight was over. Harry had Conway pinned to the ground on his back, his strong jaws clamped firmly around the animagus' throat and his weight pinning the wolf's chest to the ground.

Both beasts were panting heavily in their sudden exertion, and Hermione gasped as she saw the feral look in the eyes that belonged to Harry's wolf form. Her gasp caused the wolf to look up, and immediately his look softened in realisation of what this would look like to his friends.

He backed away from Conway quickly and both changed back into their human forms, helping each other to their feet. Harry shot a guilty look at his friends, before helping Conway brush his robes down. "Sorry." He murmured. "I shouldn't have done that." He nervously glanced at his friends again, trying to gauge their reaction.

Conway laughed at him, and started mimicking Harry's movements with the multi-animagus' robes. "What are you apologising for, Pi?" he asked. "I was the one who attacked you after all." He took a moment to rub at his throat. "But maybe you could've eased off on the death grip a bit, though" he added.

Harry nodded. "Sorry." He muttered again.

Sheridan shook his head in defeated gesture. "It means something when you can still beat your opponent after being ambushed unawares."

"I wouldn't say he was totally unaware." Brogan said. "After all, he must've imagined we would claim some sort of compensation for our unexpected shower!"

"Besides" Brandon added, "I don't think he got off completely unscathed. Look at his shoulder."

Hermione gave a squeal and rushed forward, "Harry! You're bleeding!"

Snape gave the girl a scathing look. "Really, Miss Granger." He said. "Do you have to pitch your voice at such high levels this early in the morning?"

Harry sent him a glare before shrugging off the Gryffindor prefect's attention. "It's okay, Hermione." He assured her. "It'll be gone in a couple of hours. That's one of the benefits of having a phoenix form."

She looked at him dubiously. "Honestly." He said again. "It's fine!"

Leo looked at the slowly rising sun, then down at the worn watch around his wrist. "Well, we'd better be heading off." He said, and at Harry's questioning gaze explained, "The other Marcello students will be waiting for you to go and start their training. They'll be needing some sort of briefing now we are here, and Albus has kindly loaned us the use of..."

Harry started shaking his head and backing away. "Oh no." he said firmly. "No! No way am I taking charge of the training. You agreed that the Masters would do it until I felt I was ready."

Horus shook his head. "No, we said that we would continue to follow traditional methods until you reached an acceptable standard and gain enough experience to be able to run things on your own. And there is no way that is going to happen unless you start taking charge."

Harry glared at the other Marcello students who were smirking at him, and at Dumbledore and Snape who were looking decidedly amused. "This is so not funny!" he insisted. "I am not ready for anything like this."

"Oh, I don't know." Remus said with a smile. "I have had very good reports about that illegal defence club you ran last year."

Harry shook his head. "But that was all Hermione's idea..."

"But you were the one that ran it." Hermione interrupted.

Harry huffed angrily. "I don't want to do it." he muttered sulkily.

Brogan laughed with the others. He placed a heavyset arm over Harry's shoulders, and started directing him towards the school building. "But do you have a choice?" he asked.

"You did make a promise to the old man." Conway pointed out.

"And what better chance have you got than having two Masters who will willingly support your decisions, and a number of students who will set the example for the others?" Horus said. rHarHHHHhH

"Trust us, Pyro." Leo said. "Without the presence of other Masters and students who might want to question your authority, this will go a lot easier. These boys have followed you here for a reason, most probably because they admired the way you dealt with Orson..."

"Just because I got him back for killing Kat." Harry said sourly.

Leo glared at him. "Snap out of it, Pyro!" he said, becoming impatient with Harry's self-degrading. "You'll find most of those boys were already won over before Kat died and you appeared with Orson's body. It was your novel approach to Orson's tauntings that inspired them. By refusing to fight him they realised that there was more to Marcello than fighting. There was also honour. That's why those boys are here, Pi. That's why they followed you. They want reason for what they do."

Harry looked up from where he had been looking at his feet, making brief contact with the others before shaking his head, once more looking down at the ground.

"The Doyen saw it in you." Leo said in a softer tone. "And to be honest, I did too. Why else would we spend the time to train you as we have? Why else would we encourage you and the others to form friendships and learn to work together? There was a reason for it, Pi. Marcello needed to change, and when you started up the training groups with Kat and the others we realised that you were what it

needed. You showed us that companionship is a vital part of human nature, and that teamwork can achieve a lot more than working individually. But often that team needs inspiration, someone to lead them...”

“And that would be you, Harry” Dumbledore said with a soft smile, coming up behind Leo.

Harry frowned at him, but its intensity had been lost. “There’s no need to gang up.” He muttered.

Dumbledore smiled. “I just like to see my students reach their full potential.” He said. “And you cannot deny that people often hold a certain degree of respect for the credibility that comes with being the Boy-Who-Lived. That name holds a lot of power, Harry. Power that can be used to unite people to fight together.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “I’m really not going to be able to get out of this, am I?” he said.

Sheridan chuckled. “I’d imagine this would go a lot easier if you looked more enthusiastic about the whole thing.” He said. “After all, think of all the things you could do with twenty fit young men who are willing to comply to your every order...”

“Chill, Romeo.” Todd said. “And get your head out the gutter.”

Harry turned to where the Hermione and Ron were standing with their professors. “Do I stand a chance of having any of you see things from my point of view?” he asked hopefully.

Ron shook his head. “I’m sorry, mate.” He said. “But what I saw you do out there was amazing. If nothing else you would make a great example to others. You know, for not letting him beat you, and being determined to keep going, and so on.”

Hermione nodded. “And Professor Dumbledore is right, Harry.” She said. “You’ve been through a lot, but that just makes people respect you even more. Yes, okay, I’d admit that some people have made it

their life's work to present you in a negative light..." Harry snorted. "...but they'd still follow you if you gave them reason to."

Snape nodded. "Loathe I am to admit, Potter, but I agree with Ms. Granger. But I'd add extra emphasis to the latter part of her argument. People need motivation, and therefore they would need a reason to follow you. I suggest you take up your place with these students, get some practise in so that your leadership techniques won't backfire on you when you need the support the most."

Harry sighed, knowing full well of the reasons why he was expected to become such a prominent figure in the upcoming war, though it didn't make him like it any more. "What do I have to do?" he asked.

"Just be yourself." Leo replied automatically. "That should be more than enough."

Harry nodded, inhaling deeply before following his friends across the grounds of Hogwarts. As he walked, Ron and Hermione fell into step beside him.

"Sorry, mate." Ron said awkwardly. "I know how much you hate all that "Boy-Who-Lived" crap."

Harry nodded. "I guess it's a big part of who I am." He said. "I just had to live with that."

"But it is not all of who you are." Hermione reminded him. "The Harry we know is so much more, yet at the same time so much less than what their expectations predict."

Harry's breath caught in his chest as he remembered that night he had spent with Kat in the clearing at Marcello. Her words had implied the same meanings as Hermione's had. He sniffed a little as an acute sense of loss filled his chest, and he had to gulp to remove the lump in his throat that was threatening to block his airway.

He had really loved Kat, and he had never been ashamed to admit that. She had reminded him of the meaning of life that evening by the lake, and he felt he owed it to her to fulfil the promises he had made

to himself after she had left. He no longer worried about having the power to defeat Voldemort, both the gifts he had received from his phoenix form and the awakening of his elemental powers had given him enough confidence to face the Dark Wizard, but he knew he was no match for the large number of Death Eaters and other evil allies that he would have predictably been recruiting. It made a painful sort of sense to know that he would need others to be there with him during the final stand, though he hated the idea of putting others at risk.

He looked up to see where the others were silently leading him, and frowned when he noticed they had passed the path that led to the front entrance of the school and were instead walking around the tall, stone structure towards...

"We're going the Quidditch pitch?" He asked Ron.

The boy nodded glumly. "Dumbledore cancelled Quidditch after the attack in Hogsmeade." He said. "Said it was too dangerous."

Hermione nodded. "There was obviously a large uproar about it." she said. "I think Cho is still appealing on behalf of the teams, but all he says is that he'll try and organise a dance or something to compensate."

Harry looked thoughtful as they continued to walk. "So he's leant us the use of the pitch for our training then?" he asked, and Hermione nodded.

"I assume so." She said. "That seems to be where we are headed."

Harry tried to calm his nerves and willed his katana to appear in its sheath across his back as he walked up to where Leo and the other Marcello boys were waiting by the entrance to the stadium. As he passed they took their places behind him, effectively cutting those from Hogwarts out of the parade as they walked under the arch that marked the way in.

Ron huffed a little at this, but was calmed by Hermione's hand on his arm and a small smile accompanied by a nod from Leo as he took up

the rear of the procession. From that look, Ron realised that this would enhance the symbolism of Harry's position at the school, and that it was best dealt with those who were part of the school. Instead, he followed Dumbledore and his other professors as they inconspicuously made their way to some of the ground-level stands to take a seat.

As Harry walked onto the pitch, he observed the other Marcello boys congregating around in a group, though one that was much quieter than those commonly seen at Hogwarts. He was aware that the others were following him, though didn't dare turn around to see what sort of impression they were making.

As he neared the other boys they noticed him and snapped to attention, quickly marking out their places and performing right-dress to ensure that they were all inline and equidistant apart. Once their positions were checked they all faced front, raising their arms in the position of attention that had been adopted by Marcello tradition.

Harry frowned at their actions. He knew that this was the behaviour expected on the arrival of a Master, but after his experiences with Orson he knew it was something that he didn't want to continue.

"Stand down!" he ordered as he came within hearing distance and stopped in front of the two lines of students.

The boys looked at him doubtfully, their eyes not daring to waver to question their neighbours. At their delay, Harry repeated his order. "Stand down! Why do you continue to stand like this?" he asked.

One of the boys on the front row spoke up. "Because we are to respect you. By standing like this we can show that respect, and you know that we are listening to what you say."

Harry shook his head. "I believe you would show more respect if you actually made eye-contact with me, it would show that you are attending to what I am saying, and not letting your thoughts wonder as to how long it would be before I would let you drop your arms. Now, once again, stand down!"

The boys slowly lowered their arms and looked towards Harry who nodded. "I'm no older than any of you," he said as an explanation. "And many of you have much more experience than I have. Because of that I want to propose a working relationship with you. I will eventually become Doyen, it's a given fact with my ownership of Kudos, but until then I am happy to stand on a level with you, to listen to you and respect you. And in return I hope that you can give me the same level of respect."

He watched as the boys looked towards one another. "You all came here for a reason." He said, carefully using the same words that had been used to convince him to take up his position as Master. "And I believe that reason is because you didn't agree with the traditions of Marcello. You felt there was something missing there. With the training exercises that myself, Leo and Horus are going to explain to you today, and with the demonstrations from a couple of others, I hope that you will come to realise what it is that Marcello lacks."

He turned to where his friends were standing, and was silently elated to see Leo and Horus give him quick nods of congratulations. "Shall we start?" he asked with a self-satisfied air, and proceeded to separate the Marcello students into groups, with a Master and a couple of his friends in each.

Chapter 44: Goodbye to the werewolf

Later that afternoon, Harry walked along one of the long corridors leading from the Gryffindor's common room to the headmaster's office, where an Order meeting had been arranged for that evening. He was lost in nervous thought, partially about meeting the Order members again, but also due to the events he had planned afterwards.

He was so distracted by his musings that he didn't see the other boy until he had passed him by, and was only alerted to his presence by a small cough and the footsteps that were following his own.

Harry spun, his palm flat and poised ready to release a wandless curse should his follower be a threat. He almost heaved a sigh of relief as he recognised who it was, but didn't totally relax in the other's company.

"Malfoy." He greeted with a small nod.

The Slytherin nodded in return, not reaching for his wand, but choosing to lean against the oak-panelled wall of the corridor and examine his rival.

"I heard that you had returned, Potter." He started.

Harry nodded in turn, not wanting to provoke Malfoy in anyway.

"I've also heard some interesting rumours about you training at Marcello."

Even though it was posed as a statement, Harry could hear the question in his voice and took a steadying breath to calm the tension that was usually evoked by confrontations with the silver-haired Slytherin.

"What is it to you?" he countered calmly.

Malfoy shrugged slightly. "My father has told me a lot about Marcello." He said. "Claimed that it was one of the best schools

around... My grandfather was a student there, and taught my father everything he knew."

Harry's eyes narrowed with wary curiosity. "You know how to handle a sword?" he asked.

Draco rolled his eyes at Harry, though the courageous Gryffindor could sense there was an element of bitterness in the gesture. "What pureblood doesn't know the art of swordsmanship?" he countered. But at Harry's silence further explained. "My father felt that my skills weren't worthy of a Malfoy, so stopped my lessons. I know how to handle a blade, but nothing that could rival the skills of those who have been to Marcello."

It suddenly dawned on Harry what the root of Malfoy's bitterness was, and realised that the stereotypical Slytherin had been brought up with a sense of inadequacy, much like he had in the Dursley's household. "Story of your life, right?" he asked.

Malfoy's eyes narrowed dangerously. "You know nothing of my life, Potter." He snarled.

Harry nodded. "True." He said. "And I'm not in any position to pry about them. So why are you here, Malfoy?"

The boy pushed himself away from the wall, and walked forward a few spaces until he was only a few feet away from Harry.

"My father has sent for me." He said. "I'm going to take my place by his side as Voldemort plans further attacks against Dumbledore and the Ministry. He wanted me to find out what I could about you before I left."

"And you expect me just to tell you everything I've learnt over the past few months so that he knows what to expect?" Harry asked, though he made an effort to keep his voice calm.

Malfoy stared intently into his emerald eyes. "I'm not one to follow you around covertly to find out your secrets, Potter." He said. "Merlin

knows I have been in your shadow for too long now, and I'd loathe to spend any more time there than I have to."

Harry shook his head. "It doesn't have to be this way, Malfoy." He said. "You don't have to do what your father says to prove yourself. You shouldn't have to live up to expectations that cannot be achieved..."

"You know nothing of what is expected of me, Potter!" Malfoy snarled, taking a further step forward and spitting into Harry's face as he spoke. "You know nothing of the honour that accompanies being a pure-blood. You know nothing of the pressures to live up to your family name."

Harry didn't flinch at the other boy's close proximity, just continued to stare calmly into Malfoy's gaze. "I may not know." He said in a soft voice. "Voldemort never gave me the chance to find out what it was to live up to a family's expectations. But I suspect that my parents would have wanted me to be my own person. They would be proud of me when I made my own decisions, and would be there to help me if I made the wrong ones. Never would they have wanted to run my life according to their guidelines. Never would they have tried to make me into someone I wasn't ready to be."

"Well maybe we can't all be blessed with your perfect Gryffindor mentalities, Potter! Not everyone's families are as understanding as you would wish them to be. Some of us don't have a choice."

"Everyone has a choice, Malfoy." Harry said. "You don't have to go."

"And what would you rather I do?" Malfoy started pacing in front of the still figure of Harry, gesturing with his hands in such a way that indicated his agitation. To Harry, it told him of the helplessness the Slytherin was feeling about the situation. "Stay here and cower under Dumbledore's protective wing? I think not. As soon as You-Know-Who arrives that foolish muggle-lover will have other priorities. He wouldn't hesitate to sacrifice a select few to protect the greater good. He won't be able to help me when my father comes for me."

"Then let me help you." Harry proposed. Malfoy stopped his pacing and stared at his rival in silence as he continued to speak. "I have many new skills that I can use against your father, Draco. I'm a multi-animagus, cross species even. I have also developed a concentrated wandless magic, which I can control for infinite periods of time. Not to mention that I will soon become Doyen, the future headmaster, of Marcello." He pulled Kudos from its invisible sheath across his back, and watched as Malfoy's eyes widened. "If I request it of them, Marcello's students will defend you to their best of their abilities. I doubt your father would be able to get near enough to harm you."

"What sword is that?" Malfoy asked in awe.

"The Sword of Kudos." Harry said. "It was given to me by the Doyen at Marcello as he died, on the condition that I would take over the school when I was ready."

A small, uncharacteristic smile appeared on Malfoy's face as he gazed at the sword, and Harry saw the smallest flicker of hope appear in his grey eyes before the boy gave his head a quick shake, restoring the cold mask that commonly graced the Slytherin's face.

"So the famous Harry Potter will lead his admirers into battle." He gave out a short laugh. "Dumbledore's Golden Gryffindor has returned to rid the Wizarding world of all evil, and still he pretends as if he actually cares about those who have ridiculed him and taunted him throughout his school life." He spun on his heel and started striding away down the corridor away from Harry, his head held high and his shoulders pulled back.

"Its not like that, and you know it, Malfoy!" Harry shouted after him. "I'm not like that!"

Malfoy paused as he reached the end of the corridor and half turned to look back at the dark haired wizard. "You'd better be." He said in a serious monotone that Harry could barely decipher at that distance. "Else the rest of the Wizarding world doesn't a chance!" and disappeared around the corner, leaving Harry standing alone in the despotic atmosphere.

Minutes later found Harry walking up the steps leading to the headmasters' office. He paused with a sigh outside the shut door, absently listening to the voices from within. He looked back down the stairs, thinking about the confrontation he had just had with Malfoy and jumped when he heard a voice address him from behind.

"What's seems to be the problem, my boy?"

Harry turned to see Dumbledore stepping out from a doorway that he had never seen before. As the headmaster closed it behind him, Harry noticed that the frame seemed to melt into the wall, making it practically unnoticeable unless you were directly looking for it.

"I've just met Malfoy." Harry returned as the headmaster walked over to him. "He's gone to join his father." He watched as a look of defeated acceptance crossed the old man's face. "I tried talking with him" Harry continued. "But I just couldn't get through..."

Dumbledore smiled at him. "Some people just can't change, Harry, no matter what we try and do for them. Particularly in young Malfoy's case. His desire to impress his father far outweighs any individual logic he may own, and I fear that he may come to realise that too late."

The headmaster looked at the young man standing in front of him. "You look truly magnificent in that get up." He said with a proud smile, and Harry blushed. He had been convinced by Ron, Hermione and his closest Marcello friends to arrive in full battle robes. He had naturally argued against it, but, as usual, had been convinced otherwise by his friends. "Are you ready for your first Order meeting?"

Harry nodded. "Hermione and Ron said they were coming." He said. "But when I went to the common room to walk up with them they weren't there, so I'm assuming they are already inside."

Dumbledore nodded, and placed a hand on Harry's shoulder before pushing him to the office door. "In you go." He said gently.

As Harry walked in the door, he immediately felt suppressed by the silence that fell over its occupants. He scanned the room, noticing

various familiar faces from the meetings that had taken place in Grimmauld Place the year before and gave a quick nod to some of the more recognizable members that smiled at him in return. Harry allowed Dumbledore to lead him through the silence to a seat between Horus and Leo who were there on behalf of the Marcello students, and Ron and Hermione who gave him quick smiles before the peace was broken by the cry of Ron's mother.

"Harry!"

Harry grinned as he was enveloped in the hug from the maternal figure of the Weasley family. Her exclamation had broken the silence of the room, and for the third time since his official return, Harry found himself the centre of a crowd of people, all wanting to shake his hand or give him a welcoming hug as they asked for further details of his absence.

"If we could all take a seat, then maybe Mister Potter could enlighten those of us who don't already know about his time away?" Dumbledore suggested, and Harry once more found himself the focus of attention as he recounted his story.

He included more details than he had told to his friends in the Gryffindor common room the evening before, yet kept some secrets, such as his elemental abilities and his phoenix form, from becoming common knowledge.

"Thank you, Harry." Dumbledore said, standing as Harry finally took his seat and gratefully accepted the glass of water that Hermione had poured for him, ignoring the curious and thoughtful looks of the others around the table. "I am also happy to introduce Leo and Horus, who are Masters at Marcello. They and a number of their students have accompanied Harry back here to help us against Voldemort, as it seems there will soon be a number of students with similar abilities siding with him."

"Has there been any news of Voldemort's latest plans?" Kingsley asked in the short silence that followed. "There has been no news at the Ministry, and Fudge seems to find it more beneficial to travel the

country and create a good public image rather than focus his attention on organising Ministry resources against possible attacks."

Dumbledore nodded thoughtfully. "That man is more foolish than is healthy for this community." He said mostly to himself, and looked up around the table. "Mundungus." He called, acknowledging the man who was sitting at the furthest point of the table away from them. "Have you heard any news?"

Mundungus Fletcher was a man well known for his shady dealings with lesser-known wizards. Even though he often had problems prioritising his activities, he was loyal to the Order, and was able to provide useful information gathered from various useful contacts that knew about Voldemort's plans.

He nodded his head a couple of times around the group as he hesitantly stood up, not fully appreciative of the attention directed at him. "From what I've heard around, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named isn't overly pleased about young Harry's return." He said. "Word on the street is that he has had to move his base of operations, though to where no one seems to know."

"Why would he do that?" Tonks asked. "It seems madness to do something like that when we still have no idea of how to attack him."

Harry coughed slightly, attracting everyone's attention as he raised his hand apologetically. "Though I'm not one to question Voldemort's sanity," he paused and let the usual response to the Dark Lord's name die down. "I do believe I know why he's had to move." He glanced around the group before continuing. "When Orson dragged me off to Riddle Manor after Christmas, I kinda let loose on my magic again. My guess is that his family home would resemble that of the Dursleys about now."

Some of the groups laughed slightly at his apology. "Well it certainly buys us some time." Shacklebolt said.

"But buys us time for what?" McGonagall asked. "What can we realistically do? There are so many people who are becoming too scared to venture out of their homes due to the threat of Voldemort

attacking them, and there is nothing we can do to alleviate those fears."

The room descended into unorganised mutterings as the members discussed various ideas with their neighbours. Only five people sat silent, thoughtfully watching the proceedings and catching snippets of varied ideas and proposals for the future.

Leo turned to look at the strong features on the face of the boy next to him. "What are you thinking, Pi?" he asked softly, after watching Harry's expression for a long moment.

His question caused the other three silent figures to turn their attention to the future Doyen, and watched as the boy nodded his head a couple of times, his eyes darting around a wax-burn in the middle of the table in front of him as he thought through the finer details of his potential plan.

"It seems to me that the most frightened out of all of us is the students." He said in a distant voice. "Being kept within the confines of a castle without any means of releasing their nervous energy will provide Voldemort with just the type of chaos he needs to overthrow the wards here and launch an attack."

His quiet voice had caught the attention at those near the group, but still he didn't make eye contact with anyone, just continued to stare at the table.

"Its not only the students, though." Hermione said. "There have been a lot of reports of Wizards trying to move out of England to safer shores. They don't want to risk Voldemort attacking them."

Harry nodded. "They just need something to rekindle their faith." He said. "Something to unite them all together." He turned to Hermione. "Isn't that what the Sorting Hat said at the welcoming feast the other year? That we must unite within the school or face the dangers?"

Hermione agreed hesitantly and Remus Lupin leant forward, attracting Harry's attention to where he sat on the other side of Horus

next to Snape and the headmaster. "What are you proposing, Harry?" he asked.

Harry stared into the werewolf's eyes for the briefest of moments, before sitting up straight and meeting the gaze of the headmaster who had also been watching the boy's actions.

"You have banned Quidditch." He stated, and continued without waiting for a response from anyone. "And whereas I can see that was necessary due to the potential dangers, it also increases the stress levels within the school. That stress then spreads through the letters and other correspondence to the students' families, and then spreads again to the places where they work..." Harry took a deep breath, suddenly aware that most of his half of the table was now listening to him. "It is amazing that something as simple as Quidditch can cause so much discord. I propose that we try and organise a chance for some of that stress to be released. A Quidditch tournament! To be run over a weekend, or even on one day! Everyone is invited!"

The table fell into silence after Harry had finished his speech enthusiastically. Many of the Order members were sharing confused looks, none of them really understanding the reasoning behind Harry's plans. Suddenly Snape slammed his palm flat against the table and leant forward. "You're baiting him!" he exclaimed.

Immediately the table erupted with noise, everyone trying to argue the absurdity of Harry's suggestion until Dumbledore called order and looked to the multi-animagus for further explanations.

"Yes." Harry said in a calmer voice that caused the final few mutterings to die away. "I am baiting him. If we organise the event to take place within the next couple of months, and advertise it well, then he wouldn't be able to resist the opportunity. All of the people he wants out the way the most will be there. You, headmaster," he nodded to Dumbledore. "Snape, various Ministry officials, myself... and all on the grounds of the one place he wants to conquer. It would be a chance he couldn't afford to miss."

He took a slow sweeping look over the silent Order members, observing some of them shaking their heads at him. "But!" he

exclaimed. "There will also be all the parents of the students, all of whom are capable of wielding a wand should the need arise. And also extra security, provided by both the Ministry and the Order. I think that with a few other defences we could prove to him that we are not about to roll over and submit to his attacks. If he chooses to come to Hogwarts then he will have to come to us on our own terms. We'll have the upper hand, and it'll be the only chance we'd get to beat him." As he finished his proposal he looked at Dumbledore, who nodded in understanding.

"But what about the students?" Remus asked. "The risk would be colossal."

Harry nodded. "So we plan some drills in advance." He said. "Allocate the prefects and older students the job of getting the lower years safely into their common rooms where they can be sealed in and protected until things become calmer outside. I also propose that we ask the house elves to use their powers to additionally protect the students. They are powerful little creatures, and I think we could do worse than to place them in charge of defending the castle against any Death Eaters that manage to get through our ranks."

"And what about the other defences?" Moody growled from the other end of the table.

Harry worried his bottom lip with his teeth for a moment, thinking, but not dropping the gaze the one-eyed man levelled at him. "I believe the twins can get their creative juices flowing." He said, turning to the identical Weasleys. "Maybe not so many of those orange smoke bombs that I saw in Diagon Alley, but maybe a few appropriately placed swamps would hinder their movements slightly? As well as any new prototypes that need testing?"

He left the twins grinning at each other, and looked between Dumbledore and Charlie Weasley. "And how hard would it be to chain a dragon up somewhere behind the castle, just to deter any rear attacks?" Before they could reply he diverted his attention to Hagrid. "And what about your brother? Is he still in the forest?" When the half-giant nodded he continued. "And could you talk to Aragog? I would go myself but I'm liable to get eaten. Tell him that it's a free for

all for him and his family if any wizards enter the forest that day. We'll just have to warn those coming to the tournament not to stray near there." He paused a moment before continuing. "Maybe I could say the same to the Centaurs..."

"Have you gone crazy?" Ron asked, just as confused and alarmed at the suggestions his friend was making as the rest of the Order members who were sat around the table. "The Centaurs would never listen to us, not after what happened in the forest last year. They made it perfectly clear that they wanted nothing more to do with wizards."

Harry nodded. "But have you looked at the sky recently?" he asked, glancing at Remus as he continued. "Not only is it nearly the full moon, but Mars is closer to Earth than it has been for years. The sky couldn't get much brighter."

"You think you'd be able to use that to convince them to join us?" Hermione asked dubiously.

Harry shrugged. "Even if they don't want to outwardly support us, they won't have much choice when Death Eaters start storming through their homes in the forest to get to the school. They deserve to be given the chance to defend themselves if nothing else. And at the same time, it would help us out by defending attacks from the direction of the forest."

The room looked towards the headmaster. Many of them were half expecting him to call Harry's ideas foolish and naïve, and were shocked when the old man nodded his head with a sombre expression on his face "Alas," he said in a low tone. "Though I do not wish to force anyone into a possible life-threatening situation, I fear that this may be the only option we have to prevent a long and dangerous war with Voldemort." He looked at Harry. "It seems that all we have needed is someone with the courage to point out the obvious. Harry is right, the Quidditch tournament will bring people together, and will remind them of better times. But at the same time it will give them something to fight for..."

"You can't be serious!" Snape spluttered. "It'll be a massacre." A number of other witches and wizards nodded in their agreement, but the headmaster shook his head.

"A drawn-out war would have the same effect, Severus." The headmaster said patiently. "But with a longitudinal war we would not have the control that comes with drawing Voldemort onto home turf. The priority, of course, will be to protect the school and those within her. The older and more capable students can take charge of them inside the castle, just as Harry suggested. That would leave the adults to protect the front of the school with the professors, Order members, and any Aurors we can recruit." He sighed. "I suspect that we shall need all the help we can get."

The rest of the meeting passed in a very short time as most people were still in shock at Harry's proposition of actually inviting the Darkest Wizard of the time onto the grounds of the one place they believed was safe from his attacks. Dumbledore arranged a time for another meeting of the full membership and other allies of the Order in the great hall for later that week.

Even though the meeting itself was over, it took a long time for the people to disperse, and Harry found himself subjected to a number of confused and anxious looks from the Order members as they congregated in small groups.

He stood in the corner with Leo and Horus who had not been as affected by Harry's suggestions as the other meeting members. This was most probably because they had not yet formed the same sort of attachment to the school as the Order members had, many of whom were ex-students and were hesitant to agree to any plan that threatened their sanctuary.

Harry let the ideas of his fellow Masters wash over him as he looked sombrelly over the crowd in Dumbledore's office. He smiled slightly as he made brief eye contact with Remus Lupin who stood talking with the other Hogwarts' professors. Over the course of the day he had often seen the lycanthrope place his right hand into his robe pocket and take a quick glimpse of the blood red stone that Harry had given him for Christmas. Harry had noticed that the man had carefully

wrapped the treasure in a silk handkerchief, an obvious protection against the burning sensation he had felt when Harry's phoenix form had sung to him that morning in Grimmauld Place. Now, even as he watched, the boy saw his friend reach once more into his pocket, as if the stone was a source of reassurance for him.

He started to stride across the room towards the tired-looking man, but Leo checked his progress by placing a hand on his upper arm. "What are you up to now, Pyro?" he asked, though his suspicious tone of voice was undermined by the caring warmth in his eyes.

"I'm going to give a friend his gift." Harry replied, and Leo nodded, dropping his arm. "I'll take him up to the astronomy tower. There shouldn't be anyone up there this time of night." He hesitated before walking away. "Maybe you can come up a bit later, just to make sure everything went okay?"

Leo smiled as Harry's voice let slip the level of hidden anxiety the boy was feeling. "I have faith in you." the Master assured him. "But Horus and I will come up shortly. Just to make sure." He added with a nod.

Harry smiled appreciatively at him, then continued to make his way across the room to where the defence professor was standing.

Remus Lupin looked up as the son of his departed friend came to stand before him with a small smile on his face. "Well, Harry, you certainly know how to get people thinking." He said, indicating the room with a small wave of his hand.

Harry nodded, but didn't stop looking at the werewolf's face. Remus shifted uncomfortably under the intense emerald gaze that reminded him so much of the boy's mother. "What is it you wanted, Harry?" he asked, and watched as the boy's smile fell from his face, being replaced by a serious determination.

"I would like a quick word with you, if that's okay?" the boy said. "I haven't had that much of a chance to talk to you alone since I've been back, and I feel that I owe you some explanations."

Remus shook his head in disagreement. "You don't owe me anything, Harry." He said softly, but the boy shook his head.

"Just... will you come with me?" he looked at the lycanthrope pleadingly. "Please?"

Remus nodded, and followed Harry from the room, neither of them saying any goodbyes to the other professors or Order members. Both men walked in silence for a time, Remus sub-consciously letting the teenager guide their direction as he waited for Harry to start speaking.

Harry took a deep breath and started to talk in a low voice. "Before I was taken" he started. "I spent a lot of time thinking about Sirius' death, and about all I could've done to prevent it..."

Remus shook his head and interrupted before Harry could continue. "There is nothing you could've done, Harry." He said. "There were a large number of people to blame that night, so don't go thinking that anything you could've done would have prevented Fate from taking control. Sirius died as he would've wanted, and most importantly, he was doing it in defence of the one person he could still count as family."

Harry walked in silence until the end of the corridor. "It seems that a lot of people I love have died to protect me." He said in an emotionless voice. "My parents, Sirius, Kat..." he drew in a long but shaking breath. "There was one time at Marcello when I questioned that. I was thinking that if I didn't let anyone love me, then they wouldn't want to put themselves at risk because of me, and they wouldn't get hurt."

"But life doesn't happen like that, Harry." Remus said. "You can't control who decides to care for you in that way."

Harry nodded. "Kat saved me that night." He continued. "She told me that she wanted to leave Marcello, and come to stay with me here at Hogwarts." His lips twitched in a half smile as he remembered that night. "I honestly believed that she was the one thing that would never leave me. After all, Voldemort didn't know about her, and she was more than capable enough of defending herself against any

Death Eaters..." He sighed. "When she died I became aware that I had a choice. I could either give into those feelings again, knowing fully well that there would be no-one there to catch me to bring me back. Or I could learn from the lessons they gave."

Remus looked intently into the boys face. "And what lessons were those?" he asked.

Harry met his gaze. "Pretty much what you just said." He explained. "That I can't control who loves me. But I also knew that, until Voldemort and his followers are gone, there isn't much I can do about the risks they would take for me."

He looked back along the corridor, and Remus noticed that there was a stairway at the end that led up into the astronomy tower. "But I can show them how much they mean to me." Harry said in a determined voice that caught the lycanthrope unawares. "Something I sorely neglected to do last year."

He started walking up the stairs, pushing Remus' shoulder with his hand as they climbed. As soon as they entered the windowless room at the top, the werewolf turned to Harry. "What are we doing here, Harry?" he asked hesitantly, not really understanding the boy's intentions.

Harry turned to the werewolf and looked him in the eye. "Remus, do you trust me?"

Lupin frowned at the out-of-place question, and his eyes darted quickly around the room before he answered. "Of course." He replied. "What's...?"

"No!" Harry shook his head. "I mean it. Do you really trust me? This won't work unless you do."

"What won't work...?"

"Remus! Please?" Harry said. "Do you trust me?"

Remus looked into the anxious green eyes in front of him and nodded quietly, seeing that this wasn't the time to ask Harry why or what he was doing. "I'd trust you with my life." He said. "Just like I trusted your father."

Harry seemed to accept this answer, as he gave a quick nod and took Lupin's shoulders and pulled him to the centre of the circular room. "Kneel down" he told the werewolf and he himself lowered himself to the floor so that they sat opposite each other with their knees touching.

"Do you still have that stone I gave you at Christmas?" he asked.

Remus nodded, a small frown still creasing his forehead as he pulled out the silk-wrapped stone. Harry took the gift and gently unwrapped it, placing the stone against the flat of Remus' hand.

The werewolf flinched slightly, expecting the burning sensation to start again. When it didn't he relaxed his features and examined the stone closer. "What is this?" Remus asked and Harry shifted his weight slightly, taking deep breaths and making himself comfortable.

"It's something I've been researching for a while now. A present from me to you, to show you how much I care."

Remus frowned. "You don't have to do this, Harry." He said. "I know things have been hard for you..."

Harry smiled again, silencing the lycanthrope as he reached for the man's other hand. He made the werewolf cup the stone in between his two palms before covering them with his own.

"You have to trust me." He said. "What's going to happen next will feel... strange. It might even hurt a little bit. But you have to accept the feeling. Don't try and push it away."

Remus frowned slightly, but nodded. "I trust you." he said again and Harry nodded lightly before closing his eyes and inhaling deeply.

Lupin frowned as Harry let the breath out slowly, and gasped as the boy opened his eyes to reveal them glowing with a power he had never seen before. Before he could react to the oppressive pressure that had filled the room Remus felt something reach into his body. A sharp pain coursed through his veins, making his muscles spasm, his hands burn, and a scream erupt from his mouth.

The pain was over almost as quickly as it had started, and the Hogwarts' professor fell forward, collapsing onto the floor. He felt something land with a thump next to him before letting his eyes roll back and succumbed to the awaiting darkness.

Remus Lupin awoke a couple of days later to the familiar sensation of being in the Medical wing. For a brief moment he thought he was back in the time when he was a student at Hogwarts, and had been allowed to rest under the watchful eyes of Madam Pomfrey as he recovered from the ordeal he went through every full moon.

With a start he realised that there were a number of people talking in excited whispers at the other end of the ward, and fell back to reality with a shock when he realised that he was no longer a student at the school, but a professor of defence.

He opened his eyes, and let them focus on the figure of a boy sitting in a chair by his bed. It was nighttime, and the moonlight falling through the window gave the boy a fantastic look, as his upper right face was painted silver by the lunar glow whilst his lower left face was golden in the light radiated by the candle on his bedside table.

"What happened?" he croaked.

Harry smiled and leant forward. Remus could see that the boy was a lot paler than he remember him to be. But through the boy's tiredness, Remus could sense warmth radiating from him as his emerald gaze turned to the open window opposite. The lycanthrope followed the direction of the boys' eyes, and felt his heart stumble as he realised the consequence of what he saw.

He started to push himself to his elbows, ignoring the exclamations made by the others in the ward as they rushed over to his bed.

"How...?" he turned to Harry, who just shook his head and held out a hand. The defence professor took it, and let Harry support him as he stood up and stumbled over to the window. He rested his hands against the stone window ledge and stared up into the sky.

Harry watched with satisfaction as the older man's eyes filled with tears, reflecting the image of the full moon before they blinked, sending the sparkling tears down the face of the cured lycanthrope.

"How...?" he repeated, and, attracted by the movement of the boy in front of him, looked down to see the stone that he had been given as a present was now filled with a swirling black cloud.

"The powers of phoenix are far superior to those of a wizard." Harry said gently. Remus reached for the stone, but Harry pulled it out of his reach. "And one of the purest forms of light magic there is. Once activated it worked against the darkness of your curse, hence it burned you when you first touched it. You just have to understand how the magic works."

Harry's smile grew wider as Remus turned back to the window. "You're free, Moony." Harry said quietly, letting the words sink in as more tears fell down the man's face. He glanced over the man's shoulder at the others who were standing with happy faces in the room behind them. "Though I feel we might have to think up another name for you." he added, and gasped with surprise as the man suddenly threw his arms around his lithe form, spinning them both around and letting out a loud laugh as the realisation hit that he would never have to go through another painful transformation again.

Chapter 45 – Preparations

"C'mon, Harry. You are the Gryffindor seeker. Without you we'll have no hope."

Harry shook his head as he walked down the corridor, once more heading to another meeting in Dumbledore's office. "No, Ron. You can hardly call me a Hogwarts student anymore. Especially since I am the master of my own school."

"But you'll love it." Ginny insisted, pleading with her dark eyes as she skipped sideways beside him as they walked. "When was the last time you were on a broom?"

"Probably when that Umbridge woman took it off him." Hermione pointed out from where she was walking calmly behind the group with Neville as the two Weasleys harassed Harry from either side.

Harry smiled, but shook his head. "I hardly need a broom to fly now, not with my Animagus forms." He said, having explained a few more of his abilities to Neville and Ginny after one of the DA meetings. "Besides, what about you, Ginny? You're the Gryffindor seeker now."

Ginny shook her head. "I'm a better chaser." She said. "C'mon, Harry. I've never known you give up the chance to fly."

Ron pushed the broom towards Harry again, causing the Master to stop walking. "We have virtually a novice team. We only have a couple of weeks left to practice, and we could do with all the extra help we can get. And what with someone with a status such as yours on the team...."

Harry smiled a little and looked at his old firebolt as Ron held it out to him. He could see a number of scratches on the side that he hadn't remembered being there before, and he supposed they were there from being chained up in Umbridge's office the year before.

"You know you want to." Ginny gave him a nudge and a smile. "Just take it, Harry."

"It'll put you right in the middle of all the action." Ron insisted. "You'll love it."

Harry sighed and finally reached out his hand as the two Weasley's gave whoops of joy, leaving Hermione and Neville sharing a look and rolling their eyes at the siblings' actions.

Harry held the broom out to Ginny. "Can you and Neville take it back to the common room?" he asked. "We really ought to be going if we are to make this meeting on time."

Ginny nodded and took the broom. "You'll tell us what happens?" she asked.

"Of course." Hermione said. "Start rounding people up for a DA meeting later tonight. We'll come straight down and let you know what's going on."

Ginny nodded with a smile, and she and Neville started making their way back down the corridor to notify the other DA members. Since Ron and Hermione had been allowed to sit in on the meetings, the prefects and other members of the DA had been kept well in the know of Voldemort's movements, as both Hogwarts' representatives knew how dangerous keeping secrets could be from the consequences of the Ministry incident the year before. Dumbledore had given them permission to do this, keeping with his "telling-all" agreement from the summer. Though he had said he'd trust them not to reveal the more delicate details that was discussed within the meetings.

Harry continued walking down the corridor with Hermione and Ron, hesitating briefly when he noticed someone standing outside the entrance to the headmaster's office. He smiled when he noticed the familiar figure of his father's friend.

"I see you have been cajoled into something else." Remus said as the three of them walked up.

Harry grinned and shrugged as Ron said, "What do you expect? We couldn't let such fine talent go to waste!"

"I was thinking more along the lines of it being the perfect opportunity to have a birds eye view of the grounds, in order to spot any possible attack." Harry said nonchalantly as Remus said the password to let them into the headmaster's quarters.

Ron spluttered. "And what about the snitch?" he asked.

Harry shrugged again, "What about it?" he asked, and suppressed a grin as Ron's face turned white.

"C'mon," Hermione said slightly impatiently, taking her boyfriends arm and leading them into the office. "He's only kidding you, Ron."

"Right." Ron said, but kept sending the odd glance Harry's way as they took their seats.

As soon as they had said their greetings to the other Order members around the table, Dumbledore entered and started the meeting.

"Preparations seem to be going as planned." He said. "I've been in a meeting with the house-elves for most of afternoon, sharing a cup of tea whilst discussing the procedures for getting the students to safety. It seems that they were in agreement that we should give the parents of all the younger children that are not yet students here at Hogwarts a portkey to transport them directly into one of the defence rooms downstairs. It won't be as direct a target as the great hall, and should give the elves a chance to react accordingly should any Death Eaters get past the barricade we shall make at the front doors. The same treatment will be given to any people who are incapable of defending themselves. All current students will be taken through one of the side doors and led to their common rooms where their presence will be checked by the prefects. Once all students are inside, the prefects can then shut and charm the doors, and the various portraits will move into more secluded paintings around the school until such a time that they feel the common rooms can be opened again safely. This should also hinder the movements of any Death Eaters trying to gain access to the common rooms."

He took a small breath as he looked at where Ron and Hermione were sitting. Both Gryffindors sat straighter in their seats as they felt his gaze. "I have also had various requests from the older students for permission to join the adults in the confrontations that are likely to take place in the front of the school. Whereas I appreciate their desire to help, I must insist that only sixth years and above be given the choice for this, and that it is vital that none of them feel pressured into fighting."

Molly Weasley started to protest, but her husband shook his head at her. "They are old enough to make the choice, Molly." He said quietly.

Dumbledore nodded. "I understand your concerns, Molly, and I assure you that I feel the same. But you have to understand that the more help we have, the more the likelihood that this will be finished once and for all. I will be making a few conditions to their involvement, however. Those who are in fifth year will be given their own responsibilities to look after the other students. They will be required to oversee and maintain what happens within the school, consequently being just as important as they would be if they were fighting outside it. I am also going to restrict the movements of those students outside to the front of the building..." He held up a hand as Ron and Hermione started to speak, each with a different argument. "The purpose of this," he continued. "Is that you will be the ones to return into the castle to warn the others should anything go wrong outside."

He lowered his hand as silence once more fell over the table. "If it turns out that we are fighting in vain, then it will be your job to get all those within the school to safety before Voldemort is able to gain entrance. I will be giving each of you a number of passwords to some Portkeys that will take you and as many as you can gather around them direct to the Ministry building. It is the next safest building past Hogwarts, and its defences should give you the time to make some alternative plans..."

His voice drifted away, and everyone in the room knew that there wasn't really much chance of thinking up any alternative plans that could prove useful. If Voldemort took Hogwarts, then there wasn't

much that could be done to prevent him from slowly taking control of the entire Wizarding world.

"What about the other defences?" Moody growled into the silence.

"I have some friends who should be bringing a Norwegian Ridgeback to protect the rear of the school." Charlie Weasley spoke up. "He's not fully grown, but should prove to be some sort of deterrent to anyone coming in the back way. Anything bigger and we'll have to focus more attention on controlling the dragons than on protecting the castle."

"Norwegian Ridgeback?" Hermione asked. "The same one that we..." she stopped, glancing around the room, and letting her eyes rest briefly on Hagrid who was fidgeting excitedly in his over-sized chair.

Charlie grinned. "Yeah, it's Norbert!" he said. "He's pretty well trained, for a dragon that is." His grin grew wider. "And he just loves to play! Just doesn't realise his strength half the time."

Most of the Order members chuckled at his comments whilst the others just looked on slightly confused. No one felt the need to explain Hagrid's attachment to the adolescent dragon though.

"Do you really think this is going to work?" Snape asked in the silence that followed. "It couldn't hurt to be a little realistic here before we all go and get ourselves killed."

Shacklebolt nodded in agreement. "He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is not an idiot." He said. "He's bound to realise that there is some sort of trap involved, and shall probably do something unexpected, like attack in the days prior to the tournament, or even in the days afterwards when people have relaxed and let down their guards."

"Has there been any news about his plans?" Harry asked, speaking up for the first time.

Dumbledore shook his head, after glancing around the group. "I haven't heard anything, no." he said. "And whereas it would be useful to know what he is planning, I feel the best we can do is be vigilant

and make necessary alternative plans. No one will be allowed on the school ground until the morning of the tournament, and, should nothing happen, they will all be requested to leave come the end. This will deter Voldemort from attacking in the days prior and post the tournament." He shrugged. "Unless we hear something concrete about his plans then I feel that is the best we can do."

The table fell silent again, until Harry spoke up. "There is one way to know what he's planning." He said slowly, and looked up to meet the gaze of the headmaster, ignoring the questioning looks of others around the table. "Since I started at Marcello, I've been able to Occlude my mind from any visions or link to Voldemort's thoughts. On occasion, though, there have been times when he has managed to get through. It was in those instances that I was able to get word to you of possible attacks, as I was able to see what he was planning through his own eyes, and sense his moods and thoughts."

Dumbledore shook his head. "It is not safe to go prying in the mind of a mad-man, Harry." He warned. "If he knew what you were doing..."

"We haven't been linked for a long time." Harry said. "He wouldn't expect it, and I doubt he would realise I was there until I had managed to get enough information out of him. We only need to know whether he is planning on arriving at the tournament, or whether he is planning something else. And this is the only way we can do that!"

The table fell silent whilst Dumbledore stared at the boy thoughtfully.

Snape muttered something under his breath about Gryffindor foolishness and Harry smirked. "I seem to remember that my "Gryffindor foolishness" saved your life when you were in the Riddle household."

"Ah, but you weren't delving willingly into his mind then." Horus pointed out. "If anything, you were more than delirious with blood loss."

There were various gasps from Harry's closest friends around the table and they started firing questions at him until Dumbledore raised his hand for silence. Once he had the attention of the room once

more, he turned to Harry. "How exactly is it that Voldemort gets through your defences?" he asked warily.

Harry grinned wryly and looked at Horus and Leo. "Pile on?" Leo suggested with a small smile.

Harry shook his head. "I was thinking more of a free-for-all." he replied.

Later that evening found a number of spectators sitting in the stands of the flood-lit Quidditch stadium, watching as the Marcello students stood in a crowd around Harry, Horus and Leo on the centre point of the pitch.

"Why exactly are we here again?" Cho Chang asked sourly, as she pulled her cloak tighter around her in protection against the cold wind.

Ginny rolled her eyes at the girl's complaining. Ever since Harry had told her at one of the DA meetings about Kat and how he wasn't looking for another relationship so soon after her death, the girl had been giving him the cold shoulder, refusing to talk to him or his friends in Gryffindor. The only thing that had interested her was the visit made by Harry's closest Marcello friends to one of the meetings, and she had watched intently as they had given a wandless magic demonstration.

The Marcello students had gone on to help the DA students practice the basics of wandless magic, mostly focusing on getting the Hogwarts students retrieving their wand should it get dropped or taken by an opponent. Cho had gone out of her way to flirt with the boys in an attempt to make Harry jealous, but made no attempt to hide her disgust when Sheridan had told her about his boyfriend, Horus, and had proceeded to tell her exaggerated stories of how the boys made their own fun at the school.

Hermione and Ron had invited the rest of DA to watch the unplanned training session initiated by Harry, after Horus had promised them that it would be an impressive sight to see. They had been joined by many of the Order members who had not yet seen the Marcello students practice. All were slightly apprehensive as to what they were

about to see, as none of the Marcello Masters had elucidated what Harry had meant by "free-for-all".

As they watched, the Marcello students split away from the meeting in the middle of the pitch, and started walking around, conjuring up large crates and walls that were obviously to be used in the training session. Harry stayed standing in the middle of the activity, swinging his arms and performing a few other stretches as two of his friends, Conway and Brandon, stood near him, exchanging the occasional word as they watched the others position the props.

It didn't take long to set up the pitch, which now had various places to take cover and launch attacks from. Leo walked up to Harry and those in the stands watched as Harry nodded a couple of times before speaking in turn.

When they had finished, Leo made his way to the stands where the professors and other Order members were sitting, leaving Harry standing alone in the middle of the field, his head lowered as he concentrated on deep, calming breaths. Hermione and Ron looked at the leopard-animagus as he took a seat between Dumbledore and Lupin and started explaining. "We haven't tried anything like this before." He explained. "This even goes against Marcello's ethics, but Pyro has talked about giving it a go for some time now, fully aware of what the consequences are likely to be."

"What is he going to be doing?" Remus asked, watching as Harry continued to stand unmoving, whilst the other Marcello students stood in pairs or small groups, their arm gestures making it evident that they were discussing possible attack plans.

"He's going to take on all the students." Leo said, so softly that Hermione, Ron and Neville, the closest of the DA to where the adults were sitting, had to strain to hear him.

"All twenty of them?" Tonks exclaimed. "Even Moody isn't that daft!" she added as Leo nodded.

"Foolish Gryffindor." Snape muttered.

"Not just foolish," Remus said, shooting to his feet. "It's plain suicide." He started to descend the stairs of the stand to speak his mind to the boy who had cured him weeks before.

Leo chased after him and held him back. The whole of the DA were now watching the two men as Remus struggled against his firm grip. "He just wants a chance to see what his limits are." Leo tried to explain. "He's expecting to lose."

"Why would he do such a stupid thing like that?" Ron asked.

Hermione looked down over the pitch thoughtfully for a moment before replying. "He said in the letter he sent us at the end of the summer that he only experienced visions when he was injured, because he didn't have enough time to occlude his mind before going unconscious." She looked at Leo as he managed to placate the ex-werewolf enough to get him to sit down. "It's the only way he knows to get into Voldemort's mind," she said, articulating it as a question.

Leo nodded. "And it gives him the chance to see how far he can push himself in the process." He said, retaking his seat next to the defence professor. "He shouldn't get seriously injured, most of the blades have anti-cutting charms on them and if any of the boys are hit or disarmed then they are to sit out. The aim for the Marcello boys is to disarm Pyro by whatever means possible. And, for a wizard who is talented in wandless magic, it is inevitable that the only way to do that is to knock Pi unconscious."

A shout from the pitch below caught the attention of all those in the stands, and they watched as three students strode quickly up to Harry from different directions, their swords raised high to attack. From behind a number of the defences that had been set up other students shot some curses his way, most using their wands to improve accuracy and consistency.

Harry continued to stand still until the last possible moment, throwing up a wandless shield to protect him from the curses that had been sent, and only moving to pull Kudos from his back to deflect the first blade attack from the oncoming swordsmen.

He moved quickly against the three armed assailants, spinning easily to position all three in front of him in order to prevent any rear attacks. He soon disarmed his first opponent, sending the boy's blade spinning high into the air with an upward stroke of his katana. He snatched at the hilt of the blade as it fell to the ground, and used it to defend himself against two other boys that had now joined the initial attack.

All the time he was also dodging the curses and jinxes being sent his way by the others who had grown more confident now the swords flashing dangerously in the immediate vicinity took up Harry's attention.

Suddenly, Harry dived at the nearest of his attackers, dropping one blade and changing into a wolf in the same movement to send the boy hard into the ground as he collided with his chest. Harry kept his balance, and used the boy's chest as a springboard to leap towards the other Marcello students who had been using magic against him. Before they had realised what had happened, Harry had floored another three students who had been standing near one another, slashing one's shoulder with his teeth, and causing the other two to drop their blades.

Almost instantly he turned back into his human form, banishing the swords and also their wands with a sweep of wandless magic from his hand. He turned back to the other boys who were once more converging onto him, and once more called Kudos from the air, spinning in a tight circle to force the others to keep their distance.

He sent off a few wandless curses as he backed himself up against one of the wooden walls that had been conjured before hand, his right hand swinging his blade easily against the attack from one assailant. He managed to disarm another two other students before he had to place two hands on the hilt of his blade to defend against more sword attacks.

With a snarl that was the first sound Harry had made since the attack began, he charged forward once more, knocking the sword from one student with a swing from Kudos, and charged his shoulder into

another student, sending them both barrelling onto the floor with the boy that had been standing behind them.

Harry rolled, once more swiping his hand at the air to remove the wands and swords from the boys' hands. He tried to catch his breath slightly as he raced away from the now tightly group aggressors, spinning as he once more reached the centre ring of the pitch. He flicked some sweat soaked hair that had come loose from its band away from his eyes as he saw the others advance onto him warily. Harry noticed that his six closest friends were still present in the attacking group, and were now exchanging looks and signs with each other, working as a group just as they had done in practise.

Harry quickly scanned the area around him, looking for anything to help him in this attack as the boys started to circle him. Before he allowed them to completely encircle him, he jumped backwards into the gap, causing the boys to rush to close the circle. As soon as they fell for his feint, he dodged forward, sending a disarming curse with his left palm at the same time as he thrust his katana upwards, easily causing the boy in front of him to make his way to the sidelines to sit with the others as Harry rushed by him, spinning so that he once more faced the armed students.

The four students that Harry hadn't trained with prior to Hogwarts charged at him, swinging their blades or raising their wands as they neared. Harry glanced to his side to see a large box like structure that had been used to defend one of the students, and raised his hand to it, quickly transferring his katana to his left hand as he summoned the wooden crate towards him, intercepting the charging students and sending them tumbling to the floor.

He quickly disarmed them and turned to where he had last seen his six friends. He hesitated when all he saw was Todd standing there, looking small and insignificant against the extensive backdrop of the rest of the stadium, even though the fox animagus had his wand pointed at Harry.

Harry straightened up, trying to control his breathing as he listened for any sound from the last of the armed Marcello students, and

keeping half an eye on the image of Todd, who hadn't moved since Harry had noticed him.

Suddenly, from the air Harry was attacked by the two-winged animagi. He immediately transformed into his wolf form, having learnt from experience that it was better to fight animagi with another animal form, though he was transformations were limited to the wolf due to what he had told his friends in the DA.

He snapped at the birds as they swooped and dived, keeping a particularly careful eye out for the talons on Horus' hawk form as they aimed for his face. He heard a snarl from in front, and turned his attention to Conway as the wolf attacked him. Within moments, Todd had joined the snarling wolves as they wrestled on the ground, their teeth snapping and tearing at each other's fur as they rolled across the floor.

Harry could see that he was getting outnumbered, and with a burst of strength pushed away both the mammalian animagi, running away a few yards before turning and transforming so that he could send a couple of stunners their way. Once they lay unmoving on the floor, Harry once more straightened up, his head turning to the sky as he searched for the two elusive bird animagi. He didn't hear the footsteps behind him until it was too late, and barely registered the sharp pain on the back of his neck before he fell to the floor unconscious.

Brogan looked up as Sheridan walked over, Horus and Brandon transforming as they came to land beside him. Brogan idly flipped the heavy handled dagger in his hand as he smiled at them. "Well, that was easy." He said with a small smile.

Horus just shook his head. "He really needs to learn how to watch his back." He said. "Its his only failing."

Conway laughed slightly as Brandon released him from his hex. "We'll conveniently forget that he managed to fend off fourteen of us then, shall we?" he asked.

Brogan shrugged slightly as he dropped to one knee beside the unconscious figure. "Well he got what he wanted," he said, casually taking Harry's pulse. "He's out like a light."

"Let's get him back to the infirmary." Horus said, bending down and placing a hand on Harry's chest. Without a word Harry was slowly levitated from the ground, and they started making their way back to the castle.

Up in the stands the others had sat in amazement as they watched Harry fight until he had been knocked unconscious.

"That's our Harry?" Ernie Macmillan from Hufflepuff asked disbelievingly as Leo and Lupin led the other adults onto the pitch to where Harry was being attended to by Horus and Brogan.

Ron looked at Hermione and smirked slightly. "I know exactly what you mean, mate." He said, standing up and following the others down the stairs. After a few moments, the rest of the DA stood as one and walked in a dazed fashion onto the floodlit pitch, following the procession into the main building of Hogwarts Castle.

Chapter 46: Return of the dragon

Harry stayed mentally still, not daring to move in case he inadvertently announced his presence to the Dark Lord whose eyes he was presently looking through.

It was a strange sensation, as the previous times he had seen a vision through the eyes of Voldemort had been accompanied by intense feelings of hatred and darkness. Their absence was highly noticeable, and though he realized that even the most evil of wizards would have to take time to sleep and to rest, Harry felt lost in the blankness that filled the Dark Wizard's mind as he stared blankly into the shadows, alone in the great hall of his new headquarters.

All he could see in the darkness was the shadowy movement of a pair of long torn curtains blowing raggedly by the breeze coming through the broken windows, creating an eerie sound in the otherwise silent room as the Dark Lord stared absently into space. Harry felt that it would be just his luck that there would be no way of finding out Voldemort's plans before his intrusion was discovered and he was occluded from the Dark Wizard's mind, no doubt with a painful reminder that he shouldn't stray that way again.

He sighed, patiently waiting, and forced himself to stay alert for any change of mood, or a little thought that would indicate the Dark Wizard's plans. It seemed like forever before Voldemort's vision slowly moved to the doors at the other end of the hall, and Harry could sense a degree of annoyance from the Wizard as a number of his Death Eaters walked into the room, disturbing his quiet time.

Harry recognized the faces of Lucius Malfoy and his son, as well as those of Avery and the two Lestranges. All of them peered apprehensively from underneath their dark hoods as they knelt and briefly kissed the earth in front of Voldemort's feet.

"Well, what is it?" Harry felt himself saying.

The Death Eaters stood to attention, and Bellatrix stepped forward. "We have news that the giants aren't willing to side with us for this

battle." She said boldly, before stepping back into line, giving no explanation as to the giants' decisions.

Harry felt a sudden influx of emotions from the Dark Wizard's mind, ranging from the usual rage to disappointment. His eyes narrowed dangerously and Harry asked why the giants weren't willing to side with him, after all the discussions and agreements they had made.

The elder Malfoy stepped forward, albeit slightly hesitantly, and Harry noticed Draco drop his eyes to the floor as if he knew what was likely to happen next and wasn't willing to watch it.

"They told us that nothing was worth traveling all that distance to attack Hogwarts on a day that has obviously been set as a trap, my Lord." The elder Malfoy said firmly, though Harry could see his apprehension as a wave of anger soared through Voldemort's body.

Harry silently screamed with pain as Voldemort cast the Cruciatus curse on the silver-haired Death Eater. "HOW DARE THEY QUESTION ME?" he snarled, finally releasing the writhing man from the curse.

Harry sighed with short-lived relief as Voldemort stood up from his seat and started to pace. "They have no right to question me." He repeated angrily under his breath.

"But it makes no sense to us either, my Lord." Bellatrix said tentatively. "Many of our allies would not be available for such a battle, as it falls on the day after a full-moon..."

Harry bit back another scream as another curse was emitted from Voldemort's wand.

"If we could only postpone the attack until the week after..." Bellatrix's husband, Rodolphus said. "It would lead them into a false sense of security, and they would never expect it..."

Voldemort's curse was redirected once more.

"You cannot say it does not make sense." Avery said in a monotone, knowing exactly what was going to result from his words, but he and the others had made a pact to attempt to convince the Dark Wizard to rethink his plans. "We are all willing to follow you, of course. But it seems to me that we will be fighting a hopeless battle without a full force behind us..."

Harry felt the blood in his veins burn with hatred as Voldemort uttered the curse once more, and then found himself standing before the silent figure of Draco Malfoy.

"Do you dare question me also?" Voldemort said in a quiet, but dangerous voice.

The younger Malfoy raised his head, briefly glancing at the figures rolling on the dusty ground to his left before meeting the menacing red eyes that stared at him from the snake-like features of the Dark Wizard.

"It is not my place to, my Lord." He said respectfully.

Voldemort continued to stare into the boy's face before he nodded. "You will do well if you keep up that mentality, my boy." He said. "Much better than others in your family."

He raised his wand again and shouted the curse once more, causing Harry to fight against the link between them before the pain overwhelmed him completely.

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Back in the Hospital Wing of Hogwarts castle, Leo and Lupin stood silently near Harry's bed, watching Madam Pomfrey bustle around with various potions, muttering under her breath about the number of times the foolish boy had needed her attention over the years.

The men turned as the door to the ward opened, and Dumbledore and Snape walked in, followed closely by Harry's Marcello friends, Hermione, Ron and Ginny. "How is he doing?" Conway asked, peering at the unconscious form on the bed.

"Hasn't woken up since Brogan knocked him out." Leo replied.

"That was nearly four hours ago!" Hermione exclaimed.

"Hey, I didn't hit him that hard." Brogan said, raising his arms in defence as the Gryffindor prefect shot a look at him. "That boy just has a real soft head."

Sheridan snorted. "Yeah, that's right." He agreed. "He managed to knock himself out on a badly placed pebble before our visit to Diagon Alley."

"He managed to knock himself out?" Todd asked, raising one eyebrow.

Sheridan shrugged. "Okay, okay. So I was the one who tackled him, but I wasn't the one who chose a rock as a crash-mat." He said. "Besides, he wasn't out for half this long before."

Remus looked across at Snape and Dumbledore. "You think he's going to be okay?" he asked worriedly, but before anyone could reply the youngest Weasley gave a small cry and scooted over to the side of Harry's bed. "He gave a kind of sigh, and turned his head." Ginny explained as Leo and Remus came closer and questioned her.

Remus leant in so that he was level to Harry's face. "Harry, can you hear me?"

"Shh," Leo said, placing a hand on the Marauder's shoulder. "Don't wake him. He's dreaming. Look at his eyes."

Remus nodded, watching the boy's eyelids flicker and his head twitch slightly as he followed things in his mind that no one else could see.

Leo stood upright as Harry started to mumble under his breath, and turned to the headmaster who was discussing with Snape any possible ways of helping Harry occlude his mind should something go wrong. "I think we should clear the room." He said in a low voice. "Though the second time I saw him have one of these visions wasn't

that bad, but the first caused him to convulse, and both times he was extremely nauseous when he woke. I don't think he would appreciate the audience."

Dumbledore nodded understandingly, and started herding the Gryffindors out of the door, promising to tell them as soon as Harry awoke whilst Leo had a quick word with his students.

"Brogan, I want you to stay." He said somberly to the burly Marcello student. "If he does convulse like he did on the steps that time, then we might need you to help hold him down. I don't want to risk him hurting himself if possible."

Brogan nodded, and all the students looked to the bed as Harry cried out a little, his head swinging loosely against the pillow as he gave another huffing sigh.

"We'll meet you downstairs, then." Todd said before following the others out of the room, each one sending a last look over their shoulder before exiting through the door.

Brogan followed his Master over to the bed, and stood near its head on the opposite side to where Remus was diligently holding onto Harry's hand and gently brushing his long, dark hair away from his face.

"Why do I have a real bad feeling about this?" he asked no one in particular.

Harry gave out another small cry and his breathing became more erratic. Leo looked up at the potions professor and said. "I think we might need some pain-relief potions soon. Particularly those for a bad migraine."

Snape opened his mouth to verbalize the usual cutting remarks about Harry and his ability for causing trouble, but bit back his tongue. He took one long look at the headmaster before pursing his lips together and spinning away, sending his cloak billowing out behind him as he exited.

Moments after the potions professor had left, Harry let out a loud scream, his back arching painfully against the mattress before he bit his lip and choked back the cries that had briefly escaped him.

"Brogan!"

The Marcello student nodded, and stepped close to the bed, placing one knee on the mattress as he gripped hold of Harry's upper arms firmly and used his weight to prevent the convulsing boy from thrashing around too much.

Harry continued screaming and pushing against Brogan's hold for several long minutes, whilst Remus paced anxiously by the bed, staring at the boy with regret and worry in his eyes. He was still convulsing when Snape rejoined Dumbledore and Leo at the foot of his bed to discuss the possibilities of using forced Occlumency to drag Harry from his vision.

The men rushed forward when the unconscious boy finally sagged against the bed, breathing heavily with his scar inflamed brightly against his now pale face. Remus reached him first, approaching the bed from the opposite side from where Brogan was perched, to take Harry by the shoulders and call his name softly.

The future Doyen didn't respond; his head was still weaving drunkenly against his pillow, and his breaths coming jagged and rasping.

"I don't think its over." Leo said ominously after a brief hiatus, just as Harry's teeth bit down hard against his bottom lip to prevent a scream, and his back once more tensed against the hold his friend had on him.

This final attack was briefer than the previous one, and finished with Harry's emerald eyes snapping open with a slightly surprised look in them, before he began to cough wetly.

Leo rushed forward, and he and Brogan managed to turn Harry over so that the boy could empty his stomach over the side of the bed without the fear of choking.

Harry weakly gripped the edge of the mattress as his stomach heaved, until a hand containing a steaming white liquid appeared in his blurred field of vision.

"Drink this." he heard the faint voice of the potions professor say. "It'll help settle your stomach."

Harry attempted to reach for the goblet, but as soon as he released his grip from the mattress the world spun and he shut his eyes tight, pressing his forehead with its burning scar firmly against the comparatively cool mattress before he had to empty his stomach again.

"Here, Harry." he felt a steady hand on his back, and the bed tip slightly as someone took a seat next to him. He pulled open his watery eyes and turned his head slightly to see Remus sitting there, the goblet now in his hands. "It really will make you feel better."

He willingly accepted the assistance given by his friend as he took a few sips of the potion. As soon as the nauseous feeling had past, Harry once more fell against the mattress, rubbing his searing forehead tiredly against it. Again, he felt a hand rest lightly on his back, and lifted his head this time to see a small vial of a reddish liquid in front of him. Unable to get his thoughts entirely together, he willingly swallowed the bitter liquid, and was relieved when his headache began to pass moments later.

He pushed himself onto his back, muttering a weak "thanks" as his eyes began to flutter shut. Now it was all over and he was once again safe in the medical ward of Hogwarts, Harry wanted nothing more to sleep the aches and pains of the cruciatus curse that he had just experienced away.

"Harry!"

The boy groaned and tried to will the annoying voice away. Instead of disappearing, however, the voice just laughed slightly. "Though the sensation of a banishing charm is quite ticklish, Harry, you are in no fit state to be using wandless magic to its full potential quite yet."

Harry vaguely recognised the sound of Leo's voice, and tried to force his eyes open to look at his fellow Master.

"What happened, Harry?" The man asked. "Is Voldemort coming to the tournament? You can sleep as long as you like as long as you tell us that."

Harry nodded slightly, not wanting to aggravate his still throbbing head back to its previous intensity.

"He coming." he said with a breathless whisper. "Though the giants won't be there, and his Death Eaters weren't happy about it. That's why he was so mad."

Leo nodded. "Good lad." he said, gently mimicking Remus' previous movements and gently brushing the boy's sweaty bangs out of his face. The other men in the room exchanged quick glances, realising that even though Harry had matured greatly since he had disappeared in the summer, it was at times like these when they were reminded of his true age and vulnerability.

"That's all we wanted to know." Leo crooned softly. "Sleep now, we'll talk more when you wake."

Harry nodded, and pushed himself onto his side, burrowing his head into the pillow and ignoring the conversations between the other men in the room as he drifted to sleep.

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A couple of days later found Harry and his former headmaster walking leisurely from Dumbledore's office to the great hall, where the evening meal was about to start.

The two of them had decided to take a break from all the tournament preparations, and had spent most of the afternoon talking about Harry's investigations into Phoenix and their powers. Time had been forgotten until they had looked at the clock and realised how late it was. This, however, didn't stop Dumbledore from continuing his enthusiastic questioning though.

"So phoenixes don't really communicate with a set language then?" Dumbledore was asking.

Harry shook his head patiently in response to the headmaster's question. "If Fawkes were to trill a single note, I wouldn't be able to tell you if it were a specific word or anything." Harry explained. "That's probably why wizards have had a great deal of difficulty in translating what they say, and I guess the same goes for Unicorns as well. The way a phoenix communicates is more by projecting what they mean onto the person they are communicating with. They do this with their song and, I imagine, part of their magic. That is why Fawkes can make you feel happy or calm and, to a certain extent, can make you think you are right or wrong. Though, of course, the body language of the bird has a lot to say about that as well."

Dumbledore nodded. "It really is fascinating," he said, his voice drifting off as he thought over their conversations from that afternoon.

"I have one question to ask you, professor." Harry said as they walked. The headmaster indicated that Harry should continue with an encouraging smile. "When Voldemort attacked Privet Drive, he managed to use the power I produced to transport all the Death Eaters to safety. And when I was in his Circle afterwards, he tried to convince me that he could use my magic, and together we would become invincible. How did he do that? Is it possible for anyone to change the purpose of a curse?"

Dumbledore rubbed a hand across his mouth as he formulated an answer in his mind. "I honestly don't know, Harry," he admitted. "Though I feel that it has a lot to do with willing it to happen, much like the basics of the wandless magic you have mastered. I would also hazard a guess that it was something similar to what your mother did when Voldemort attacked your home when you were a baby. With her sacrifice she managed to transform the hatred contained within the Avada Kedavra curse into something full of love in order to protect you. I feel that the two emotions were so contrasting in nature, and the strength of the curse was so powerful, that you were given the ability to change into a creature that symbolises love and the desire to protect."

Harry nodded. "I guess it makes sense, for the Phoenix form had to come from somewhere. But why did she die? Voldemort didn't even seem tired when he transformed the magic at Privet Drive."

"Your mother was a very talented young witch, Harry, but she wasn't very powerful if you compare her to Voldemort. There is a marked difference between being able to perform a spell, and the ability to make that spell strong. I fear that the effort it took to transform the Avada Kedavra curse into something that would protect you was too much for her. But her sacrifice did work its purpose, and you were able to escape death that day."

The Hogwarts' headmaster fell silent and the two of them walked slowly in silence for a while before Dumbledore spoke up again.

"How are the Marcello students settling in?" he asked with a sudden change of subject. "I can see you training hard from my office window everyday, though I must admit, I am pretty naive in how well you are all progressing."

Harry nodded slightly. "The group training is going really well." he said. "They were all enthusiastic about learning new ways of fighting in pairs and small groups. I had Dean and couple of other muggle-borns come down the other day to teach them all how to play football..." at the blank but curious look the headmaster gave him, Harry went on to say. "Its the muggle equivalent of Quidditch, though it only has one ball that you have to kick into the opposing team's goal. It relies a lot on team work, and being aware of who is around you, as well as improving your fitness with all the running around you have to do."

"So you have no real worries about their training then?"

Harry stayed silent for a few moments as they waited at the end of the corridor for the moving staircase to make its way around to them again. "They all suddenly seem to be finding their Dances," he said in a slightly worried tone. "I guess it means that they will be set up against the other Marcello students when they arrive with Voldemort. Naturally, I've had them working hard at their individual practises, and

I want each of them to be as good as they can be before the time comes to use their Dances."

He smiled slightly. "I've also had them sparring against each other, as well as myself, Horus and Leo, just to see what it would be like to go against another when Dancing. Obviously, we aren't always performing the correct moves against the Dancer, as the Dance is supposed to fit naturally into the your opposition's moves when you duel. But at least it gives them the idea, and it also hones the skills of their sparring partner should they come across a Dance whilst they are fighting.

Dumbledore nodded. "Their help will be a great aid in this war." he said. "I have heard many praises from the teaching staff about the sudden improvement in many of their students' class room performances. I can only assume that this is because the additional help your Marcello friends have been giving in their DA practises."

Harry shrugged. "We haven't really taught them anything new." He said. "But it does make it so much easier having everyone splitting into smaller groups to practise in, ensuring that someone who can already perform the spells is available for assistance in each group. It just means we can work on a more individual basis."

The young Master smiled slightly. "One person who does amaze me is Neville. At the beginning of last year, he could barely remember how to hold his wand. Now, after the incident at the Ministry, he has thrown himself into learning Defence, and is usually more than capable of helping out his own little group."

Again, Dumbledore nodded, stepping onto the top step of the stone staircase that had finally slotted itself back into place before them. "Like you, Neville Longbottom has an inner strength, a power that not many people ever possess in their lifetime. I believe that either one of you had the strength to be the one of the prophecy, and it was only because Voldemort felt threatened by the similarity between you both being half-bloods that made him go after you that fateful night."

"What do you think would've happened if he had gone after Neville?" Harry asked.

Dumbledore remained thoughtful. "I honestly could not say." he finally said. "Maybe things would've turned out a lot differently, maybe everything would have been exactly the same but with your and Neville's positions swapped."

The headmaster hesitated on the bottom step before walking off down the corridor next to Harry. "How much do you think your phoenix abilities are capable of?" he asked, and at Harry's questioning look further explained. "Earlier you mentioned that you thought that Phoenix Song could hold the power to do almost everything, giving the example of Remus' cure, but also of restoring memory. What did you mean by this?"

Harry sighed. "Its hard to explain." he said. "But what if the Longbottom's haven't lost their minds? What if it is simply a case of them repressing the memories of their experiences because of the pain and anguish they went through. In which case, if we can remove the block that is inhibiting their minds, then it is entirely possible that they could be restored to the way they were before they were tortured by the Lestranges."

"And you think the Phoenix stone that you created for Remus can cure them?"

Harry shook his head. "Not that one, no." he explained. "That one has taken away as much darkness as it can hold. I'd have to make another one, probably around the same size I suppose, for each of them. The only problem with creating two more stones of that size is that it really tires me out when I'm in Phoenix form. Donating tears is nothing for a Phoenix, but their blood is a lot more potent and has a draining effect if the phoenix loses any. After Kat had taken the blood from me for the two small stones in Hermione's and Ron's pendants, and also for Remus' stone, I must've slept twenty-four hours straight."

"And may I ask why you think that the Longbottom's can be saved, when all the medical professionals at St Mungo's believe that nothing more can be done for them?"

Harry shrugged slightly. "I don't know really." he said. "But I guess it doesn't hurt to live in hope. When I saw them with Neville that time we were visiting Ron's father in the hospital, they still showed love towards him, like when his mum gave him that bubble-gum wrapper. It wasn't much, but since I've become more used to how Phoenix work, I've realised that it is that sort of emotion that the magic responds the best to. If there is any hope for saving anyone subjected to Voldemort's reign on terror, then it is those two."

Dumbledore smiled his warm smile again, causing his winkled face to light up to match the proud twinkle in his eye. "Your time away has indeed been most prolific to you." he said, before his customary twinkle diminished into something more serious. "You have matured into a fine young man, Harry," he said. "I just regret the fact that you didn't have to have this burden placed on you at such a young age."

Harry stopped outside the doors of the Great Hall and placed his hand on the elderly headmaster's robes, mentally noting the thinness of the man's frame underneath his substantial blue robes. "I don't." he said, and at the headmaster's questioning look continued. "I don't regret it at all." he explained further. "The prophecy is part of who I am. As is Pyro, and my skills with a sword, and my ability to control the elements. I have spent a long time thinking of different ways of how to do this, and have come to realise that the majority of them will end in the inevitable..." he smiled wryly. "It'll be worth it though." he said. "I'd do anything to make sure that Voldemort doesn't have the chance to hurt anyone I love ever again."

He briefly made eye contact with the headmaster before smiling weakly at the tears in the man's eyes and turning to push open the large double doors, blinking in surprise at the sudden cacophony of excitable and angry noise that hit him as he entered.

The usual dignity of the Great Hall was broken by the circle of Marcello and Hogwarts students surrounding an area just to the left of the entrance, between the Ravenclaw and Slytherin tables. The teachers were hurriedly making their way down the main aisle of the hall to stand with Harry and the Headmaster as they looked with shock at the chaos that graced their vision.

"What is going on?" Dumbledore asked, as Remus and Snape joined them, the other professors close behind.

"Malfoy has just appeared in the hall." Snape replied brusquely. "It must have been a portkey."

"Lucius Malfoy?" Harry asked, though he already knew the answer.

Remus shook his head. "No," he said. "Draco."

Harry's head turned to the noisy congregation, and Dumbledore pulled out his wand to shoot sparks into the air in an attempt to calm everyone down. He quickly assessed the situation then transformed into his wolf-animagus form, leaping onto the Ravenclaw table and making his way agilely between the half empty plates of food until he became level with where he felt the epicentre of the circle to be.

He heard the headmaster call for attention again, this time using a Sonorous charm to amplify his voice. Harry gathered his hind legs underneath him and leapt into the throng of people, using the heads and shoulders of the now still crowd as further push-off points before leaping to floor and transforming. He pressed his way through the final circle of students, comprising mostly of those from Marcello and various Gryffindors he noted, and finally came to a stop in front of the dishevelled image of Draco Malfoy.

Harry took one glance to realise that the characteristically proud and meticulous Slytherin had been through a lot. His white-blond hair was unnaturally dirty and dishevelled, his clothes were torn and the bottom end of the material was covered in mud. Taking in the glistening sheen of the boy's pale face, Harry came to the conclusion that his former foe had run long and hard to get to Hogwarts.

"Harry, get away from him! He's dangerous!"

Harry turned to where Ron was standing in the ring of students, being forcefully held back by Brandon and Conway. Hermione, Ginny and the other Gryffindors were being a little more restrained, though they all had their wands out and pointed to the boy that had disappeared from the school to join with the Dark Lord a fortnight before. A

number of the Marcello students also had their weapons drawn, though all were looking significantly calmer than those from Hogwarts.

Harry turned back to where the Slytherin stood, noting the normally proud boy's attempt to stand tall, though he was obviously in pain. "Hear him out." he said to his side, aware that the professors pushing their way through the crowds of DA members behind him. He turned to the weary Slytherin. "What brings you back here, Malfoy?"

The banished Hogwarts' student raised his head higher, and spoke with all the dignity of his former self that he could muster

"I spoke with my father," he said, though his voice contained a slight crack, as if he had been shouting loudly and for a long time. His grey eyes flickered to where he knew the sword lay invisible against Harry's back. "He says that he looks forward to duelling with you someday."

Harry glanced to where Horus stood with Sheridan and Todd. They had already discussed the possibility of his Dance being used against someone from the Malfoy family, as well as Avery and the Lestranges, all of whom Harry was pretty certain had some previous experience with a sword.

Harry took a step forward, closing the distance between him and the Slytherin. "I'm sure you didn't come all this way to deliver such a meagre message, Malfoy. Why are you really here?"

Malfoy looked around at the sea of faces around him and took a deep breath. "Last night I was called before the Dark Lord for the final stage of my initiation. He was worried that Hogwarts had been a bad influence on my loyalty and so wanted to test me prior to being marked."

"And...?" Harry asked. He could see something strange flash in the boys' eyes when they looked up at him. Harry stepped forward again as he recognised that it wasn't a rare emotion, just one that was simply foreign to the Slytherin's face.

Malfoy blanked his expression again, but not before Harry had seen the determination and vulnerability darken the greyness of his eyes before he spoke. "I failed." He said simply.

"I don't believe it." Ron shouted, quickly backed by other shouts from the Gryffindor males and a couple of other members of the DA. "You've been sent here to trick Harry!"

"Ron!" Harry glared at his friend and turned back to Malfoy, who stared levelly at him.

"The test was too hard." Malfoy explained quietly, his face emotionless. "And I failed." He smiled, though it resembled more of a grimace. "You were right all along, Potter. There is more to life than pure blood and a family name. They were going to kill me." His eyes dropped. "My own father was going to kill me."

Harry took a final step forward. He was now standing face to face with his archenemy but stayed silent. Around them, the chattering dropped until all that could be heard was a gentle murmur of voices and the slight hiss of whispers. Harry felt the presence of the Hogwarts' professors behind him, but Malfoy seemed unperturbed at the amount of attention he was getting, and continued explaining things as if it were only he and Harry in the room.

"I had no where else to go." Malfoy looked up again at Harry. "This was the only other place I've ever felt safe. This is the only place where people have tried to encourage me to be myself, and not just another Malfoy. I realise that now. And I realise just what type a person my father really was..." he shook his head. "I don't want to be like him."

"What was the test?" Harry asked quietly and winced as a wave of pain crossed the young man's face.

"There was a traitor in his circle." He replied in an equally quiet voice, though it was broken with heartfelt emotion. "She had gone against the Dark Lord's wishes and had tried to escape to see one of her many lovers. They wanted me to teach her a lesson, Cruciatus, for liasing with others outside the Death Eater group. Then I was to kill

her." Harry watched as his eyes filled up with tears. "I couldn't kill my own mother."

A gasp went around the student body and Harry sensed Snape take a step forward behind him, but before the potions master had joined them, Harry's attention was once more drawn to the silver-haired Slytherin who had looked up to meet Harry's gaze. "I guess this is very Slytherin of me," he admitted. "But I realise that there is a lot more for me here than there ever would be if I were to join You-Know-Who. A chance to love and care about someone, anyone, is the most obvious I suppose."

Draco dropped slowly to one knee, wincing slightly as his knee contacted the hard, stone ground. He made the effort to keep his head held high and met Harry's confused stare calmly with an element of hope in his expression.

"I ask that you let me back into Hogwarts," he said. "I request the chance to stand beside you in this fight. I was blinded by my father's teachings, but now... I wish for you to give me the chance to prove myself to you. To let me fight alongside you."

Harry stared at the boy kneeling before him. He could see a dark stain of blood seeping through the cloth covering the boy's shoulder, and knew how much effort it had taken for Draco, a Malfoy, to kneel down before a Potter and pledge his allegiance.

"Did you tell Voldemort anything of what I told you in the corridor that day?" He asked softly.

Draco looked him in the eye and shook his head. "Only that you had been to Marcello, and that you had mastered some basic skills such as Animagi and apparation. He went on to assume that you had not been there long enough to learn anything substantial, and I felt it to be beneficial to myself to have some information held back should things turned sour once I received the Dark Mark."

Harry sighed and made a quick decision before dropping to his own knee, one hand resting lightly on Draco's injured shoulder.

Draco cocked his head in confusion as Harry smiled at him softly. "I will look out for you." Harry promised him. "All I said in the corridor that day was true. And I don't go back on my words."

Draco snorted out a breath of air through his nose, and shook his head. "You really don't get the whole honour thing, do you, Potter?" he said, though his voice lacked its usual malicious tone.

Harry's smile grew wider. "At times I think I understand it a lot more than you do." he replied. "Honour is something that is earned. Not something that comes with a name."

As the Slytherin thought about his words, Harry focused some of his energy into the hand that covered Malfoy's wound and gently increased the heat radiating from it. He knew that the warmth from his hand would take away some of the tension away from the boy's shoulders. "Welcome home, Draco." He said quietly.

Chapter 47: The tournament.

The morning of the tournament soon arrived, and the atmosphere in the castle was tight with nervous excitement. The majority of the Hogwarts' students had been told that the event would be at high risk from attack, though every caution would be taken to ensure that security would be as secure as possible. Only the older students, in particular the members of the DA, had been told the truth about what had been planned for the day, and they had all been briefed on the various roles they would be expected to take should the attack happen.

Harry stood alone on the steps of the front entrance, watching as masses of people bustled around attending their duties, should it be for the smooth running of the Quidditch tournament or preparing some sort of defence for the school. Scores of Aurors and other Ministry personnel had arrived at the school under the cover of darkness, undergoing a briefing in the Great Hall before the students had started to awaken and make their way to breakfast. Also in the meeting were the rest of the Order members, and various other people who would prove useful when Voldemort arrived.

Norbert had arrived with Charlie and a large group of his friends via portkey in the middle of the night. It had taken some time to calm the young dragon down after the unfamiliar method of travel, but he had finally settled enough to bask quite happily in the early morning sunlight under the watchful eyes of the Dragon Wardens and Hagrid, who was asking questions about his upkeep like an excited two-year-old.

Dumbledore had gone himself to let the Centaurs know of the predicted battle during the time Harry had spent recuperating from his vision. Though they had refused to pledge their allegiance, as Harry had predicted, they did express some gratitude for the prior warning, and agreed to make various preparations to defend themselves as well as they could.

Dobby had also played an important role in the preparations leading up to the day. Though the house-elves were more than happy to provide the food and refreshments needed for the tournament, it was

Dobby who had enthusiastically taken it upon himself to organise the defences within the school. After listening patiently to the over-excited elf for most of the previous morning, Harry, Remus and Leo had to admit that the internal defences of the school would be the same, if not greater, than those outside.

Harry smiled slightly as he spotted a number of red heads making their way across the green towards the Quidditch stadium, surrounded by a large mixture of students and Marcello swordsmen. Fred and George had spent most of the week flooding back and forth from their shop on Diagon Alley with various new creations that could be used at various points around the castle grounds to hinder the movements or knock out whomsoever it was that triggered them until an antidote was administered.

Their swamps now emitted a weak sleeping gas for the immediate area that sent a person to sleep if they found themselves stuck in the bogs. They had also developed their orange powder bombs to contain more of the same sedative, and were planning on strategically placing a number of fake wands in the long grass, in order to confuse a wizard should they drop their own wand at any point. They had also told Harry that there were a number of other defences that would be triggered by those students who would be placed away from the front lines, but the exact nature of these they had withheld from the other Order members, telling them only that the fireworks they had released on their last day of school would be minor in comparison.

"Nervous?" A voice behind Harry asked. The Marcello Master turned to see Horus standing there, adorned in his full battledress with his sword sheathed across his back, a number of smaller blades hanging from his belt, and his wand strapped to a holster on the inside of his left wrist.

"Petrified." Harry replied, turning back to see the first of the visitors enter through the gate, proceeding slowly through a barrage of Ministry checks and being briefed on what to do should an attack happen. "I don't want to see anyone hurt today."

Horus snorted air through his nose. "There are what? Easily a couple of thousand people expected here today? Should Voldemort turn up, which is highly likely, it is inevitable that there will be some casualties." he placed his hand firmly on Harry's shoulder. "Just remember what we are doing this for, Pi. Every one of the people coming to the tournament know fully well what is likely to happen today, and yet they are willing to stand up together and help. Do you remember when we spent the first Sunday together by the stream? When we all agreed that, however ideal it would be, getting the Wizarding world to join together to fight against Voldemort would never happen? Well it has, Pi, and it's all thanks to you!"

He smiled as Harry continued to stare at the scene unfolding before them. "You may be slightly younger than I am, Pyro, but you would make a great Doyen. Take care of yourself and I'll hopefully see you sometime this afternoon."

Harry turned to look at him as the Master started to walk down the steps. "Where are you going?" he asked.

"Leo figured it would be beneficial to have Brandon, myself and a number of other winged animagi keep an eye on the road that leads from the town." He said. "Hogsmeade is going to pretty deserted, what with everyone headed here, so it's probably best we have some sort of early warning system."

"We have the boundary alerts set a couple of miles in each direction." Harry reminded him. "Don't you think they'll be enough?"

"When it comes to getting all those students and children to safety behind the castle walls, every second is going to count." Horus replied. "So watch the sky for any birds behaving strangely during the tournament."

Harry nodded seriously and stepped forward again, this time holding his hand out to his friend. "If I don't get chance to see you again, I want to thank you for all your help this year." Harry said as they shook. "I really don't know what I would've done without you guys."

Horus smiled sadly at him. "Take care of yourself, Pyro." he repeated. "And I'll see you when all this is over."

He turned and walked down the rest of the stone steps, he turned again at their foot and placed a finger next to his eye, then pointed at the sky before transforming into a magnificent Hawk. He soared into the air and was quickly being joined by a raven and a small number of other Marcello students as they flew towards the nearby village of Hogsmeade.

Harry stood silent and alone for a few more moments, thinking through how the events might pan out over the day. He drew in a shaky breath as he saw flashes of Kat, Sirius, and the single memory of his parents as they defended him against Voldemort's attack. He knew that fate of the Wizarding world, and even the non-magic communities, rested on how well he fought against the Dark Wizard today and he thought back to the words he had exchanged with the former Doyen, knowing that there would be only one chance to get rid of Voldemort once and for all. He was also very aware of what that chance would involve, and he screwed his face up in a determined wince as he thrust his fist into the stone rails that he had been leaning against.

He bit back the tears of loss as he made his decision, and absently rubbed his knuckles, feeling the familiar warmth engulf them as the grazes started to heal. He looked over the bustling activity in the grounds of the school as more and more people began to arrive, and concentrated on memorizing their faces as they recognised and greeted old friends, the sound of excited chatter amongst the younger children, and feeling of solidarity as the crowds grew. His chest heaved as he realised how much he would miss all these simple things in life, and turned as he felt a caring hand fall softly onto his shoulder.

"Are you okay, Harry?" Remus Lupin asked, stepping closer to stand next to the boy.

Harry, not trusting himself to speak, nodded, looking away from his older friend.

"You won't be alone." Remus continued in a soft voice. "We all know what it is that you have to do, but even if you are the one to deliver the final blow, we will all be there beside you." He looked down at his hands. "I owe you a lot, Harry, not least my quality of life. If it wasn't for you, then I wouldn't even be able to be here to fight alongside you today. And I promise that I won't let him get you. He will be the one to fall today."

Harry sniffed slightly, trying to steady his nerves as he glanced over to the defence professor. "I appreciate your concern, but I don't want anyone else to die for me." he said, his voice getting stronger the more he spoke. "This is going to be finished today, one way or another. And I'm not planning on letting him win. Not this time."

Remus smiled sadly, and pulled Harry into his embrace. "Don't do anything stupid, please." he murmured slightly into the boy's shoulder. "I've lost everyone else, and I couldn't stand it if you went as well."

Harry pulled away, understanding the man's sense of loss and fear of future loneliness. "I can't make any promises, Remus." he said softly. "You know that. Just promise me that you'll keep going? Be there for Ron, Hermione and the others? I need to know that they won't be alone when... if I don't make it."

Remus looked into the boy's pleading eyes, both of their visions blurred by tears. He gave a small nod, sealing his promise to the boy, before coughing slightly and changing the subject. "Dumbledore's been looking for you. He wanted to go through a few last minute checks with you and a few others before the tournament starts."

"Where is he?" Harry asked, pulling away and wiping his eyes slightly.

"He was in the library with Moody and Shacklebolt last time I saw him." Remus said. "It seemed to be the only place that wasn't overrun with students or Aurors, other than his office of course."

"Are you coming?" Harry asked, turning to the large entrance doors. Remus nodded, and together they made their way silently into the castle.

Moments later, they had joined the large group of team leaders congregated in the library. Dumbledore nodded a sombre greeting as Harry and Remus took their places, leaning against one of the tall shelving units as the meeting began.

Dumbledore spent a while running through the well-planned positioning tactics and possible defence strategies they would undertake when Voldemort started his attack. When he had finished, the headmaster took a deep breath before asking "Does anyone have anything else to say?"

Harry, who had stayed reasonably silent through the proceedings, stood up and away from the shelves, holding up his hand slightly to catch Dumbledore's attention. He made his way to where the headmaster stood and ran his gaze over the number of faces standing in front of him before he started to speak.

"I'm sure you all have some knowledge of the prophecy that was made about the final battle between Voldemort and myself." he started, and knew by the expressions exchanged that the prophecy was common knowledge within this particular group of people, though a number of them showed their scepticism of a sixteen year old boy successfully taking part in a duel with the darkest wizard of the age. "I'm sure it would encourage you all to know that I have an idea how to destroy Voldemort, hopefully for good this time, but it requires some performance on your part."

He watched as some of the team leaders began to look nervous. "I want you all to brief your teams to stay as far from Voldemort as possible. I don't want any unnecessary injuries from people who think they may stand a chance against him. I also want your promise to help clear the way between him and me. He won't come alone, and I'll need all my wits about me if this is going to stand a chance of working. I also want you all to promise me that, once I confront him, you will all retreat until you are standing in front of the castle." He held up his hand as a number of the team leaders started to make their protestations heard. "I want you all to concentrate on shielding Hogwarts and those inside from any possible damage. There is a great possibility of the school getting hit once we start duelling."

"What is it you are planning to do?" Leo asked curiously, his voice cutting through the various discussions that had started up.

Harry returned his gaze levelly, knowing that if anyone had any idea of what it was he was planning to do then it would be his former Master. "Just promise me you'll protect the school." he said quietly. "I'll deal with the rest."

A knock on the door to the library prevented any further discussion, and the door opened slightly to allow Ron to poke his head around the doorjamb.

"Is it okay if we borrow Harry?" he asked tentatively. "It's just there's only an hour to go before our first match, and the rest of the Gryffindor team will be heading down to the changing rooms shortly."

Harry immediately walked towards the door, seeing this as an excuse not to answer anymore questions that the others were waiting to ask him. He turned as he reached the door. "See you all on the pitch." he said with a small smile, then proceeded to follow Ron up to the Gryffindor Common Room.

Just over an hour later saw Harry soaring into the air, momentarily forgetting his worries as he felt the wind through his hair and listened to the cheers of the full stadium surrounding the pitch. He let himself smile as he slowed his broom high above the game, taking in the flashes of colour beneath him as the Slytherin and Gryffindor chasers fought over the quaffle.

He sensed Draco fly within a few feet of him and stop in mid-air with the minimum of effort.

"How are you doing, Scar-head?" the Slytherin called, grinning at the use of his old insult. "Remember how to fly?"

"It's a damn sight easier when you have feathers." Harry replied, knowing that Malfoy already knew of his multiple animagus forms. "But I don't think I've lost any of my old skills yet."

“Oh yeah?” Malfoy taunted with a smile, and Harry was surprised to see how much more human it made the Slytherin look.

Harry nodded and his eyes focused on something above Draco’s head. He flew directly at the Slytherin, tapping the blonde’s head with his hand as he flew overhead.

Thinking that the boy had possibly spotted the snitch, and not wanting to back out of the challenge made to him, Draco headed after him, racing Harry vertically up into the air until the pull of gravity caused him to lose momentum. He slowly came to a halt and levelled out, coming to the assumption that Harry had not seen the snitch, and planned on using the extra time to hunt for the snitch himself as the other seeker continued to fly vertically up.

Draco chuckled a little as he dropped to a level just above the height of the tallest part of the stadium when he heard a shout from high above him and looked up in time to see Harry reach the apex of his climb. His breath caught in his throat as he watched the Gryffindor let go of the broom with both hands, holding the broom firmly between his legs as he opened his arms wide and leant back, letting gravity take over and plummet him to the ground.

Malfoy and the rest of the stadium stared in shock as the broom and its rider headed downwards, seemingly out of control. But, as he came closer, Draco watched Harry’s hands return to the broom and direct it determinedly at the centre spot of the pitch.

Harry grinned as he sensed the other seeker join him in his descent. Obviously Draco had decided to speed after him in case he had seen the snitch, but Harry didn’t slow down, nor attempt to control the spin his broom was now conducting. Instead he turned his attention to the centre spot and mentally counted down the seconds before he would connect with terra firma.

A few meters from the ground he felt Malfoy pull up as he realised that this was, again, one of Harry’s stunts. But the Gryffindor continued, daring himself to get closer and closer to the ground before pulling up.

He heard the screams of the crowd over the sound of the wind in his ears as he finally tugged the broom out of its spin and flew parallel to the ground. His knees had grazed the grass in the manoeuvre, but he could hear the cheers as he raced the length of the pitch, allowing the momentum gained from his fall to propel him forwards at a speed he had not experienced on a broom before.

As he began to slow he circled back to Malfoy, who once more had taken position high above the rest of the game to look for the snitch.

“Are you looking for something, Ferret-face?” he asked loudly, a grin on his face as he opened his palm to allow the snitch to stretch its crumpled wings and hover a couple of inches above his gloved hand.

“When did you get that?” Draco asked, his mouth open in amazement as he flew closer to examine the snitch, as if making sure that it was the real ball.

Harry barely heard him over the shouts of the crowd, but grinned at the look on the blonde’s face. “Would you believe it was sitting behind your head before we headed up?” he asked, and laughed out loud as Malfoy’s eyes narrowed. “Didn’t think you would.”

Draco suddenly shook his head, remembering that so much had changed between them now, and laughed with his former enemy, acknowledging the fact that he did indeed deserve the credit for his seeker status.

He flew closer and held out his hand. “Well done.” He said sincerely, returning Harry’s grin as the rest of the Gryffindor team converged onto them.

As the afternoon wore on, the bright sunlight that had been present all morning had transformed into a heavy dark cloud that towered high into the air, increasing the amount of tension in the stadium as the day progressed and reminding Harry of the time the former Doyen had awoken the elemental powers within him.

Harry sat in a stand with the Hogwarts' professors as they watched the match between Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff. He had played in all the Gryffindor matches, catching the snitch in all three, although Ravenclaw had managed to win by a small margin due to the number of goals they had scored prior to his capture with their experienced chaser team. He remembered seeing the dark frown on Cho's face as he had held up the struggling golden ball, but her displeasure didn't bother Harry as much as it once might have, his attention becoming more and more occupied with thoughts on the upcoming battle.

As the game paused to let Hufflepuff take a free shot at the goals after a foul, Harry heard the keening cry of a bird of prey and spotted a hawk diving down onto the pitch from high above the level of the game. Without waiting for Horus to reach the stands in which he was sitting, Harry had stood and quickly climbed to the back of the stands, pushing past the other professors and earning himself a couple of glares in the process.

Half of him hoped that this was a false alarm that Horus was just checking in with the rest of the team before returning to the village to resume his watch. But as he looked over the Hogwarts grounds, he felt a tingling sensation that indicated that the first of the boundary alerts had been breached, and in the distance he could see line upon line of black clad wizards walking towards the school.

"They're here" he said loudly to those in the stands as he jumped back over the line of chairs and took a running leap off the side of the stands.

"Harry!" Remus leapt forward to see the young man fall feet first to the floor, his red Gryffindor robes billowing around his body madly as he fell. He transformed into his panther form at the last moment to take away the pain of the impact before leaping forward and once

more taking human form, this time in full battle dress with the Sword of Kudos sheathed ominously across his back.

Within seconds the team leaders of the Marcello students, as well as various representatives of the aurors and Order members had surrounded him as he started their final briefing.

Beside him, Remus sensed Dumbledore step forward and indicate to various students in the stands around the Quidditch pitch. Within minutes the younger members of the school were being shepherded quickly and without fuss into the castle, and the children sitting in the stands with their parents were slowly disappearing with the use of the Portkeys that had been administered at the gates as they had entered.

On the pitch floor, Remus watched as Harry ran over to where Cho and the head-boy stood with a small number of fifth year prefects, giving them their final orders before they too followed the other students into the castle.

"Oh my..." Remus spun at McGonagall's exclamation and clambered up the stairs to where a number of professors and Aurors were trying to see what Harry had seen. When he had finally pushed himself to the front he gasped, seeing the black shadow of Voldemort's followers break through the gates that marked the front drive of the castle and bleed onto Hogwarts' grounds like some sort of disease.

The professors flinched as a bright flash from one of the twins' defensive inventions took out a small number of the Death Eaters on the left flank of the advancing Wizards, shooting various coloured fireworks over the rest of the followers.

"Do you think we'll survive this?" Tonks asked a little nervously, glancing up at the light and realising that the sunlight was diminishing rapidly as it sunk behind the black clouds that promised rain in the near future.

"We'd better" Remus said in return, and in response to Tonks' questioning gaze said, "If we don't then what hope does the wizarding world have?"

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Harry watched as the last of the younger students passed through the entrance into the castle, giving Ginny a reassuring nod as she was the last to disappear into the shadow of the building. At the sound of a heavy oak beam falling into place on the other side of the closed doors shortly afterwards, Harry noticed a large number of relieved sighs as the older students and adults that had remained outside realised that the younger members of their families were now as safe as they could be.

Harry looked up into the sky as a number of shouts indicated the arrival of a mixed assortment of birds soaring in to land. He looked to Brandon as the animagus transformed, becoming alarmed at the dishevelled appearance of some of the Marcello students.

"What happened?" he asked quickly.

Brandon grinned. "Nothing much," he said. "We just figured that, seeing Horus was on his way back to alert you to Voldemort's arrival, we'd just cause a little bit of distraction to give you a little more time."

"How much time did you buy us?" Leo asked, coming up behind Harry.

"Not much," one of the students standing beside Brandon said. "We just set off some of the Weasley twins' flash-bangs, and one of the Death Eaters tripped over one of their Defensive Detonators. It was just enough to let them know that this isn't going to be easy."

"Though, by the look on the majority of their faces when they saw us, this is the last place they want to be heading to right now." Brandon added.

"Well, lets get everyone in place." Leo said, performing a quick check over his weapons. Beside him, Mad-eye Moody nodded in agreement, and limped away on his peg leg to administer orders to the others standing around the front of the castle, his magic eye spinning wildly and an eager grin on his scarred face.

Harry looked up at the top of the steps, where the more competent members of the DA were standing. He spied Draco Malfoy standing a little way apart from the other students, and took a quick moment to call Conway and Todd over. "I want you lot to leave the sword fighting to the other Marcello students." he said. "Keep an eye on the DA for me? I don't want any of them to get hurt."

Conway followed his gaze to where the Hogwarts' students were standing. "I think you are underestimating them, Pi." he said. "From what I've seen in those meetings, they are all more than capable of holding their own."

Harry shook his head. "I know that." he said. "But I also know that Voldemort would do anything to get to me, including going after my friends. You should know that a number of them have personal debts to repay. Draco and his father, Neville with the Lestranges... and Ron and Hermione would do anything to try and stop me from getting hurt. Just be close by if they need you, okay?"

Todd nodded. "We understand." he said, "We'll stay near the stairs."

Harry thanked him, then broke away from the group, walking up the steps to join his friends.

"How are you all doing?" he asked as he neared them.

"Getting nervous," Hermione admitted.

"Nervous?" Ron exclaimed. "I'm bloody petrified!"

Harry smiled at his friends. "Everything should be fine." he said. "Horus has said that there aren't as many Death Eaters as we were expecting. Dumbledore thinks that they would probably try to flank us, in which case most of them would have already been picked off by the Centaurs and Aragog's clan in the forest."

"That's always good to know." Neville said, looking pale but determined as he gripped his wand firmly.

Harry smiled weakly again, and looked across at where Malfoy was watching them. "How's it going, Draco?" he asked.

Malfoy nodded. "I'll be lucky to survive the evening." he said dully, and looked up at the sky. "And to top it all off, I'm going to be getting wet."

"Did you get the torches?" Harry asked, not really feeling up to try and improve the state of mind of the Slytherin.

Malfoy nodded, and bent down, picking up a number of long wooden torches with a tight material wrapped around their ends. "I don't know why you'll need them." he said. "It's not like they'll give you much light, and the rain will probably put them out."

"Forever the pessimist, eh, Malfoy?" Ron said scathingly.

"Now is not the time, Ron." Harry warned. "You have to look out for one another if you want to survive this evening."

"Fair enough." the youngest male Weasley said. "Just don't expect me to stand between him and his father when Malfoy senior comes calling."

"No one was asking you to, Weasel." Draco retorted.

"I don't have time for this." Harry said, he looked at Hermione and Neville. "Sort them out?" he asked softly.

Hermione nodded, tears in her eyes. "Look after yourself." she said, stepping forward and wrapping her arms around him.

"You too." Harry replied, and shook hands with Neville and Ron before giving Draco a quick nod and walking down the steps, lighting the torches with a packet of matches he had in his pocket.

He walked around the front of the castle on his own, placing the lit torches at various intervals in anticipation of needing his elements before the night was over. He looked up at the sky and said a silent

prayer for the rain to hold off just as a shout went up from the front ranks, and the first of Voldemort's Death Eaters approached.

Orders were yelled out by team leaders as people rushed into their positions, wands raised and ready to curse. The Marcello students pushed their way to the front of the groups, making eye contact with the other sword-skilled students who had joined Voldemort's ranks and had led the procession up the driveway of the school.

The two lines stopped a short distance from each other, silently eyeing up their opponents until, on an unspoken command they charged forward, swords clashing and curses flying.

Harry walked up to where the second line of defence was silently waiting for any of the Death Eaters to get through. A cry of alarm from Harry's left diverted his attention as a large number of Dementors emerged from the forest.

Harry swore as he rushed to help the Aurors, who were trying to direct an assortment of Patroni towards the soul-sucking shadows. Evidently the Dementors could not be deterred by the bows and arrows of the Centaurs, and were not to the taste of Aragog's family.

The boy ignored the cries of his parents as he neared the Dementors, instead letting the love he had felt for them and Kat, and the knowledge that he had been loved in return swell in chest before he called the incantation. A silver stag burst forth from the palm of his hand, so much larger and brighter than the other Patroni that were holding off the Dementors.

One of the monsters, with the confidence drawn from the ranks of Dementors behind it, reached forward in an attempt to push past the wall of Patroni. Harry's stag rushed to the gnarled and fleshless fingers and the Dementor let out an inhuman scream as the stag ran straight through the arm.

Almost instantly, the other Dementors around it started to scream as well, the noise they produced rivalling that of a large group of banshees.

"Get your Patroni to run through them!" Harry shouted up the line of Aurors, and the message was quickly passed on as the Dementors began to back away, pushed back by the pain produced by the silvery forms.

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Back at the flight of stairs leading to the school's entrance, the members of the DA watched with mounting apprehension as the silvery line of Patroni warded off the Dementors. Just before them, Dumbledore was striding forward strongly, leading a line of the strongest wizards to meet those coming direct from Voldemort's side.

Draco swore slightly, pacing across the width of the stone steps about half way down the staircase. With a final expletive, he quickly wiped his hand onto his robes before taking a firm grip on his wand and striding off down the rest of the steps.

"Malfoy! Where do you think you are going?" Hermione shouted. "We're supposed to stay here."

Draco turned at the bottom of the staircase and looked at her with dark eyes. "We look like sitting toads up there. It won't be long before my father comes for me, and I'm sure he won't think twice before ending all your pitiful lives as well."

"So you're finally doing the Gryffindor thing and sacrificing yourself then, Malfoy?" Ron asked coldly.

Draco shook his head. "No." he said. "I made a promise in that hall that I would stand and fight by Harry's side. I know my father will find me before this battle is over, but I owe it to Harry, and to myself, to prove my worth. I want to show everyone that I am my own person, that I don't have to live up to the ideals of my father to be a true Malfoy."

He spun on his heel and strode off, his green Quidditch robes billowing behind him.

Ron shook his head. "He's a walking advertisement in that getup." he muttered. He had quickly changed out of his quidditch robes the

moment the shout went up, as had many of the other Quidditch players that had been in the DA. "He'll get himself killed in minutes."

He sensed movement beside him and turned to see Neville pushing past and making his way down the steps after the Slytherin.

"And where are you going, Longbottom?" Anthony Goldstein from Ravenclaw asked, catching the boy by his shoulder before he could get too far.

"Finding my Gryffindor courage." Neville replied. "I've faced Death Eaters before, as did my parents. And I'm not going to wait here for the call to come up that we're losing when I could be out there helping." He shrugged off Anthony's hand, and continued down the last of the steps, losing himself in the crowd and leaving the other DA members staring blankly at each other.

After a moment's hesitation, Ron started down the steps also, but stopped when he felt a familiar hand grab his. He looked up to see Hermione gazing intently at the other DA students, a silent question in her eyes.

"Go." Hannah Abbott from Hufflepuff said. "There are enough of us here to trigger the Portkeys if it is necessary."

"Anyhow, most of us are Hufflepuff or Ravenclaw" Ernie Macmillan pointed out. "Loyal to the cause, and with the intelligence needed to think through other plans should anything go wrong. We don't need any of your Gryffindor impulsiveness here."

Hermione smiled a thanks at him, and let Ron hurry her down the rest of the steps. At the bottom she turned, and shouted back to the other DA students.

"Malfoy was right about you looking like sitting toads." she called. "I suggest you conjure up a number of barriers or something to hide behind."

Anthony nodded and raised his hand in acknowledgement, quickly losing sight of the two Gryffindors as they also disappeared in the meld of adults waiting for the chance to step forward to fight.

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Conway glanced up at the steps from where he was standing with his other Marcello friends. He swore as he saw Anthony Goldstein raise his hand in farewell, and caught the briefest of glimpses of Ron and Hermione as they disappeared into the crowd.

"They've run off." he said to the others.

"Who have?" Horus asked, coming over to him and looking up at the steps as Conway pointed.

Todd swore as well when he realised who was missing. "Pyro asked us to keep an eye on them." he went on to explain. "He wanted us to make sure they didn't do anything stupid."

"Well, I think this constitutes as stupid." Sheridan said, standing up on his toes and using his height to look over the crowds to see if he could spot the missing DA members.

"Do you think we should go look for them?" Brogan asked, mimicking Sheridan's movements, though not needing to stretch his neck as far to look over the heads of the other witches and wizards.

Horus sighed and looked about him. All the trained students from Voldemort's ranks seemed equally matched with the other Marcello students fighting on Hogwarts' side, and Leo was fighting fiercely alongside Remus Lupin, the potions professor, and various other members of the Order at the front line of the battle.

"I don't see what else we could be doing back here." he admitted. "Travel in pairs, and if you come across a duel, intervene if you wish. I don't think there is any need to fight fair in this battle."

The others nodded and paired up, heading off into the crowds and taking the general direction they had seen the two Gryffindors take.

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Neville dodged the various duels that were happening, using his shortness and dark cloak to blend into the crowds. He concentrated on sending random curses into the surrounding battles, just enough to create an advantage for the Hogwarts' side, but not enough to draw attention to himself.

He moved steadily through the lines of fighters, only getting involved when he felt he was needed. That was until he felt a sharp pain run through his body, and he fell to the floor convulsing. Through the pain, he felt his wand being pulled from his weak grasp as he suffered under the cruciatus, but did not having the strength to be able to move against the curse to get it back.

When the pain finally subsided, he looked up through tearing eyes to see the blurred image of Bellatrix Lestange grinning down at him.

"Well now." she said. "This looks familiar. Kind of reminds me of a time I caused an Auror to go mad through pain..." her eyes opened in recognition when she saw the boy's face, and her grin widened. "Like father, like son, eh kid?"

She stood up straight, and pointed her wand at the Gryffindor's prone body. "Who am I to stop a fine young man like yourself from following in his parent's footsteps?" She cackled, throwing back her head as she did so, before concentrating once more on the boy in front of her.

"Nev!"

Neville looked around in a panic as he thought he heard his name being called over the noise of the surrounding duels. Between the pairs of fighters, he saw Sheridan and Horus running towards him, swords in their hands and concern marring their faces.

He shut his eyes as the Cruciatus curse once again connected with his body, but he fought against the pain and forced his eyes open to see Horus and Sheridan being held up by a number of Death Eaters. He watched helplessly as Sheridan blasted one of their attackers

away from them with a wandless charm then turn, torn between helping his boyfriend and saving Neville from the Unforgivable.

Neville closed his eyes and turned his head into the ground, succumbing to the pain and knowing that Sheridan would probably choose to help his closest friend.

"Nev!"

The Gryffindor forced his eyes open again to see Sheridan swinging his arm, and letting his sword sail in a gentle arc through the air towards him. Without thinking what he was doing, Neville pushed against the pain of the Cruciatus and wandlessly summoned the hilt of the sword into his hand, a skill that the DA had been practising so intensively with their wands during their evening practises with the Marcello students that it had almost become second nature.

Bellatrix jumped back in shock at the sudden appearance of the sword. In the moment that the curse was broken Neville pushed up from the floor, rolling to his feet and thrusting the blade of the sword towards Lestrage, stabbing its point firmly into her thigh.

She screamed in pain, dropping the two wands she had been holding. She tried to get a firm grip on the blade to pull the sword out of her leg, but only succeeding in slicing the palms of her hands on the sword's sharp edges.

Neville pointed his hand towards the fallen wands, and wandlessly summoned them both. He used his wand to cast a quick binding charm on Lestrage before standing where she could clearly see him, and calmly snapping her wand over his knee, wincing slightly as it let out a shower of angry red sparks.

He panted slightly, his muscles still cramping from the curse he had been under and a thin layer of sweat beading against his pale skin. But a large grin crossed his face as he looked down on the inert figure of his parents' attacker.

"Nicely done!" he heard Sheridan say, and looked up to see him supporting Horus as they limped towards the Gryffindor.

"You alright?" Neville asked Horus, who nodded.

"Just a sprained ankle." the Master explained. "More of an annoyance than anything."

Sheridan reached down and pulled his sword out from the witch's leg, taking no heed of her painful expression as he held the hilt out towards Neville.

"You'd better keep hold of this for now." he said. "I'll be teaching you how to use it properly once all this is over."

"Really?" Neville asked.

"Sure." Horus replied, standing on his good leg with one hand on his boyfriend's shoulder to support himself. "Every wizard should be taught the basics in how to handle a sword. Pyro was thinking about having us teach you and the rest of the DA before, but decided it best wait until we had more time to spare."

Neville grinned, but jumped as a flash of a curse passed by his left ear.

Horus held up his hand and sent a wandless return curse back. "We'd better head off." he said.

Sheridan nodded. "It's not always wise to stand around in the middle of a battle for a chat." he admitted, pushing Horus to one side as another stray curse came their way. "C'mon." he said, supporting Horus' weight again before starting off between a couple of duels.

"Hang on." Neville said, reaching deep into his pocket and pulling out an orange ball. He stood over the prone figure of Lestrage and smiled grimly at her. "See you in Azkaban sometime." he said, and dropped the ball by her face.

The ball burst into a fine orange powder as it connected with the floor, covering the Death Eater's face and causing her to cough slightly as she inhaled the twins' latest concoction. Within seconds Bellatrix

Lestrangle had fallen unconscious, and would stay that way until someone from the Order was available to administer the antidote.

Neville then turned and took Horus' weight on the other side from Sheridan, and the three of them staggered their way through the duelling crowds towards the front entrance of the school.

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Hermione and Ron walked around the edge of the duelling crowd, steering clear of any stray curses, and staring wide-eyed at the injuries that were being caused by the intense fighting.

"So, how are we going to do this?" Ron asked, watching as Tonks and Shacklebolt worked as a team against three Death Eaters. "Just jump in and start firing curses?"

Hermione stared, her mind turning blank as she tried to think of any strategies they could use in a duel that would minimise the risks of getting hurt. It wasn't long before she admitted defeat. "I think that is the only way to do it." she said. "But I think we should stay close to one another."

Ron looked into her dark eyes and nodded. "I won't leave your side." he said, leaning over and giving her a quick kiss on her forehead before looking back at the battle. "Shall we?" he asked, and Hermione nodded once determinedly.

The two Gryffindor's jumped into the fray, both choosing a small group of Death Eaters that were already being duelled by an Order member that they knew by face from the meetings. The witch smiled her thanks at the two once the small group was easily defeated, and immediately turned away from them, leaving Hermione and Ron looking for another wizard or witch to assist whilst she jumped straight into another duel.

They worked by this method for sometime, helping out those on their side who was outnumbered in a fight, then taking a short break to catch their breath and wipe the sweat from their foreheads before getting involved and supporting another Auror or Order member.

In one of these confrontations, Hermione heard Ron give a strangled cry, and spun to see him being held from behind by a shorter man. Her eyes opened wide as she spotted the silver hand that had wrapped itself firmly around the Quidditch captain's neck, causing the Weasley to go as red as his hair as he struggled to breathe.

"Just the person I was looking for." Wormtail spat, pulling the Weasley boy back until Ron was leaning awkwardly against the man who had a death grip on his throat. "I think the Dark Lord would welcome your presence by his side. A useful bargaining chip..."

"I think not!" Hermione exclaimed, pointing her wand and firing a burning hex at the animagus, catching the man on his shoulder. Wormtail let out a cry and released his grip on Ron who fell to the floor, clutching at his throat and fighting uselessly against the dark blotches that were threatening at the corner of his eyesight.

Hermione threw another curse at Wormtail, causing the man to rely on his reflexes to duck away from its trajectory before shooting off a spell with his own wand.

The Gryffindor prefect easily countered the man's curse, and slowly diverted their positions attention away from where Ron was still vulnerably lying on the floor, slipping deeper into unconsciousness. She took a step back and was unable to catch her balance as she tripped over the inert body of a dead Death Eater. Before she could get over the surprise she felt at finding herself on the floor, Hermione felt the wand in her hand give a tug and fly away from her grip into the silver hand of Peter Pettigrew.

She reached out to try and summon it wandlessly, but suddenly found herself being dragged across the floor towards her attacker as Wormtail used a summoning charm to bring her closer to him.

Hermione struggled desperately against the spell, clutching at clumps of grass and dragging her nails into the moist earth. But her efforts were to no avail as she soon found herself in the Death Eater's shadow, and being pulled to her feet by the silver hand that wrapped itself tightly in her long hair.

"You'll do." Wormtail snarled. "Any of Potter's friends would have sufficed."

He turned and started dragging Hermione backwards alongside him, ignoring her cries as she tried to get her feet underneath her to prevent the pain as her hair began to tear away from her scalp.

Their progression was suddenly stopped as Wormtail found the blade of a sword pressed firmly against his throat.

"I suggest you drop her." A cold voice said, and Hermione managed to catch a glimpse of Conway's stony countenance before Wormtail threw her to the floor, reaching up quickly with his silver hand to push the blade away from his throat.

The man didn't see the slender figure of Todd standing on his other side, and also failed to notice the boy's sword swinging towards his body. Wormtail screamed as the sword connected with his arm, its sharp edge slicing easily through the flesh just above the point where his silver hand was joined to the rest of his arm.

He fell to his knees, weeping in agony as he gripped his bloody stump, but gained no sympathy from his opponents as Todd levelled his blade warningly at him and Conway ignored his cries to help Hermione to her feet. She winced as she ran her fingers through her mussed hair and pulled back her hand to find it covered with blood.

Conway leant over and gently examined her scalp. "I think it'll grow back," he told her with a smile. "Though I'd be wary about brushing it too vigorously any time soon."

Hermione sniffed deeply and wiped her eyes on the back of her hand, unknowingly smearing dirt across her face.

"Where's Ron?" Conway asked, "Didn't you two stay together?"

Hermione looked around the immediate area for her boyfriend, still sniffing slightly as she tried to get her emotions under control, then led Conway to where she spotted the unconscious form of her boyfriend. Conway pulled out his wand and muttered "Enervate", and

helped support the boy as he sat up and started to cough, his hand rubbing fitfully against his sore neck.

"Are you okay?" Hermione asked worriedly. Ron nodded, not trusting his voice and Conway looked back to where Todd was still keeping guard over Wormtail to give them a few moments.

The Weasley boy held out his hand to wipe away some of the mud that Hermione had smudged beneath her eyes. His eyes showed a deep concern and a silent question, to which Hermione nodded.

"I'm okay." she assured him with a watery smile. "Conway and Todd helped me out. Todd is keeping an eye on Wormtail now."

Ron nodded again, and pulled Hermione into a quick hug before Conway interrupted them with a slight cough.

"Come on." Conway said, holding out his hand to help Ron stand. "We'd better knock that guy out and get back to the front of the castle. You can still get involved in the duels back there if you like, but the curses aren't quite as dense as they are here."

Ron nodded, and let himself get hauled to his feet, taking a few moments for the world to stop spinning before letting Hermione and Conway lead him to where Todd was standing.

"We can't just leave him." Hermione said as she looked down at the pitiful man. The confident front Pettigrew had showed when he'd had the upper hand over the two students had disappeared to reveal the weak and self-pitying man that he really was. Todd had cast a silencing charm to stop the man's wails, but had kept his sword trained on the Death Eater the whole time.

"Why ever not?" Todd asked. "He's nothing special. In fact, I would say he was the most weedy Death Eater I've come across today."

"It's personal." Ron croaked, speaking for the first time. He rubbed at his throat again with his hand as he heard the scratchiness of his voice. "He spent the best part of ten years sleeping on one or other of my brothers' bed."

Todd grimaced. "You let this rat sleep in your bed?"

Hermione smiled grimly. "You don't know how close to the truth you are." she said. "Most people think this man was killed by Sirius Black, when the truth is that he was the one that set up Harry's godfather the night that Voldemort was vanquished for the first time."

"Wasn't Harry's godfather killed sometime last year?" Conway asked.

Hermione nodded. "If we take Wormtail back to the castle and keep him alive, then his presence in court would ensure that Sirius' innocence be known. It may be too little too late, but at least Harry and Remus will rest easy knowing that Sirius' name had been cleared."

Todd nodded in understanding and reversed his sword, using its hilt to hit the Death Eater over the base of his skull, knocking the man unconscious. He then cast a levitation charm and started to follow Ron and Hermione back to the safety of the castle walls.

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Harry walked through the crowds as a small number of Aurors continued to chase the last of the Dementors into the forest. He stared in despair as the rain began to fall, his torches being extinguished immediately by the sudden and heavy downpour.

He looked up at the sky, letting the rain fall onto his face and trying not to let his last thread of hope disappear as the possibility of using his strongest element in his upcoming duel with the Dark Wizard died with the last of his flames. He continued through the crowd, however, ignoring the wizards duelling around him, and his eyes searching for the one Wizard he was destined to fight that evening.

As he searched for Voldemort, Harry spotted Draco standing stock still some distance in front of him, staring at something in the direction of Hogwarts' lake. He followed the Slytherin's gaze to see the elder Malfoy returning the stare, his wand arm slowly rising to point towards his son.

Running on his instinct, Harry turned into his panther form and sprinted quickly across the already boggy ground. He gathered his strength and took an almighty leap as he neared the Death Eater, catching the wizard's wand between his teeth as the man started an incantation. His momentum made him land a couple of feet away from the elder Malfoy and he spun in a tight circle, transforming back into his human form in the same movement to be ready for any retaliation Lucius Malfoy was likely to make against him.

He watched, the Death Eater's wand still hanging loosely in his hand, as Malfoy's face broke into an evil smile. The silver-haired man reached slowly into his robes to pull out a long, curved sword, its hilt engraved with silver and gold, and various jewels were encrusted at the base of the blade.

"I've heard a lot of rumours about you recently, Mister Potter." he said silkily. "Needless to say, I'm sure most of the facts were exaggerated, most likely the product of insolent childhood rumours. Joining Marcello as a student barely eight months ago, and already achieving Master status? And soon to be Doyen I hear! Remarkable, I must say. Why don't you show me this legendary blade of yours? Maybe validate some of these wild rumours?"

Harry took several calming breaths, not breaking eye contact with the silver-haired Death Eater as he reached up and took hold of the Sword of Kudos, which was strapped invisibly across his back. As he took hold of the hilt, he felt a flash of something akin to déjà-vu cross his mind, before his attention was once more focused on the present as the elder Malfoy nodded his head in approval. "Indeed, I am surely going to look forward to this." The older man said, lowering himself into an offensive position.

Harry automatically fell into the defensive pose, unable to shake his feeling of familiarity as his foe narrowed his eyes dangerously, his smile falling from his face to be replaced by an intense hatred.

"I've always wanted to run my own school." he said, before charging forward.

Within a couple of swings, Harry felt himself sinking into the familiar sequence of moves of his Dance, and Malfoy seemed unaware that Harry was able to predict his moves and deflect them without much effort.

Harry let himself sink into his calm centre, and felt the blade take over the control of his mind as his body ran through its well-practised routine. The duel became faster and more intense, and neither fighter was aware that the other duellists had cleared a wide area around the two of them as they parried back and forth in the torrential rain.

Just as the muscles of both duellists tensed and screamed their protestation against the punishing duel, Malfoy thrust his blade forward, forcing Harry to take a step back and he launched himself into his flip. The added speed of the duel allowed Harry to snap his legs sharply up into the air, and he felt his feet connect with Malfoy's chin as he used his hands to pivot the weight of his body over his head.

Once his feet touched the ground, he gripped the hilt of his katana with both hands, his mind blank and his body responding to the conditioned routine it had practised and perfected during training.

Harry took a step forward, slashing his blade downward. His eyes widened with horror as his mind suddenly regained control over his body, but it was too late to change the course of the swing as the sharp blade sliced through the skin of Malfoy's left shoulder, passing easily through his collarbone to wedge itself just above his left breast.

Harry watched as the genetic grey eyes of the Malfoy family widened in surprise, before glazing over and rolling back into his skull as the man fell to his knees.

Almost as if an electric charge had passed through his body, Harry dropped his grip on the blade, staggering backwards and tripping slightly on his robes as he fought the urge to throw up at the sight of his sword disappearing into the dark robes covering the wizard's chest. The torn fabric moved as the wind picked up and revealed the jagged trail the katana had taken.

Harry fell to the floor with a scream as he felt a great pain spread like fire, tearing across his skin like a thousand paper cuts. At first he thought the sensation was due to the horror of what he had just done, but then he became aware of the blood oozing from the scars he accumulated over the past year, and looked up to see another Death Eater in front of him.

Avery stepped closer, the familiar sadistic grin gracing his face as he calmly pointed his wand at Harry. He licked his lips slightly as he looked down at the blood that dripped down the side of Harry's face from the scar on his forehead. "I hope you aren't going to run of this time, my friend." he said. "We have so much to share."

He grinned again, focusing his wand once more as a curse started to leave his lips. But before he could finish the incantation, Harry felt a burst of energy pass over his shoulder, hitting Avery square in the chest and causing the Death Eater to fall back against the muddy ground, unconscious.

Harry turned to see Draco standing over the dead body of his father, his wand still held firmly in front of him and a determined expression creating a dark shadow across his otherwise pale face.

He made brief eye contact with the Gryffindor, before looking down at his father lying in the mud with the sword still sticking out of his chest, the rain washing his blood into the dark ground beneath him. His wand arm dropped, as did the expression on his face and he let his emotions take over.

Harry heaved a breath, trying to fight against the pain across his newly opened scars as he ran his gaze across the battlefield, not taking much notice of the other duels that were taking place until he came to the familiar presentation of Dumbledore, standing bravely not too far away and taking a moment to survey his surroundings.

Harry continued his sweep of the field, and his heart fell into the depths of his stomach as he recognised another familiar face standing within duelling distance behind the headmaster. He watched as the second wizard raised his wand, the desire to kill evident in his narrowed eyes as he started to mouth an incantation.

Before he could think through his actions, Harry threw himself to his feet and raced forward, ignoring the shouts of the Slytherin behind him and diving behind the older man, wrapping his arms protectively about the headmaster as he felt the curse hit his upper back, sending waves of pain through his body.

Chapter 49: The final stand.

"Harry! No!"

Hermione blinked as she lost sight of the image of Harry and Dumbledore being enveloped by the glowing green light of the Unforgivable as they hit the ground by the lake, and instead found herself focusing on the tall brick wall of the castle.

"What...?" Ron turned to face her with a confused expression

Hermione spun around to see that she and Ron had somehow been transported across the grounds of Hogwarts and into the shadow of the castle walls. She pushed some wet hair out of her face and scanned the grounds; her gaze coming to rest on the now solo figure sprawled alone on the grass before her.

"What just happened?" Remus cried as he limped up to them, closely followed by Leo and Snape.

Hermione just shook her head blankly, and for once it was Ron who was able to gather his senses together enough to quickly inform the ex-lycanthrope with a croaky voice what had happened and of the Avada Kedavra curse that had hit Harry.

Leo grabbed at Remus' shoulders before he could race off across the grounds after he had spotted the unmoving form lying alone in the sodden grass. "Harry told us to stay near the school." He reminded the man before him. "He wanted us to get everyone to safety should anything happen to him."

"But he's still alive." Hermione cried. "Look" she pointed at the figure on the floor, which was struggling to turn itself over, clearly in a lot of pain.

"Harry!" Remus broke Leo's grasp and raced forward only to be brought to an abrupt halt a few yards later when he ran into an invisible barrier. "What's going on?" he asked with a frown, pushing his hands against the obstacle.

“Harry must’ve channelled the energy.” Hermione said, her mind suddenly working over time as she too placed her hands against the barrier and pushed against it. “It must be similar to what Voldemort did to Harry’s magic at Privet Drive. He must have changed the focus of the magic from one of destruction to one of protection. Its the only way to explain why we all appeared by the school with a invisible barrier surrounding us.”

“You fool, Potter!” Remus cried, slamming his fist against the wall. “Let me through now!”

His yelling was a futile attempt to making the wall disappear, and his friend’s son did nothing to register his cries as he continued to struggle to his elbows and knees, coughing up a dark liquid that looked suspiciously like blood at this distance.

“Where’s Dumbledore?” Moody shouted through the rain, trudging up through the mud as fast as his wooden leg would carry him.

Ron shrugged. “One minute he was with Harry, the next minute he was gone.” he rasped.

“If Harry was intent on protecting him, then maybe he channelled the magic into apparating him somewhere.” Hermione suggested quietly, her eyes never leaving the figure of her friend.

“He didn’t need to channel the energy.” a voice behind him said and the group spun to see Dumbledore limping down the school steps, his left arm hanging awkwardly at his side and there was a stream of blood running from one side of his forehead. “I was sent to my office moments before the curse hit.”

He rested his good hand against the invisible wall, testing the magic behind it. After the briefest of moments he let it drop again with a small shake of his head. “We talked about transforming the purpose of a curse only days ago.” he said. “And with a curse that is produced entirely by the strength of Voldemort’s hatred... There is no way through. This is his battle now.”

Remus let out a strangled cry and once again set to the wall with his fists until Leo managed to restrain his flailing arms and the two of them sank to their knees, both of them willing Harry to raise his head from where it rested on the floor between his arms.

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Harry felt more blood spurt from his mouth as he struggled to draw a breath with his injured ribs. He raised his head slightly to peer through his dripping bangs to see his friends, the school's professors and the members of the Order gathering against the wall he had created.

He understood the anguished look of helplessness on their faces as they stood there, some sinking to their knees in defeat and others taking the opposite approach by trying to break their way through the wall with physical force. He noticed the silent figures of Hermione and Ron as they stood next to Leo and Remus and coughed again, spitting out the frothy red liquid that was slowly filling his lungs and let his head drop back to the floor between his wrists, not wanting to make eye contact with the people he had sought to protect.

Before long he became aware of a presence behind him. "See what you have done, Harry?" Voldemort asked quietly, a touch of humour in his voice. "Not only have you failed to beat me, but you have also obligingly gathered together all of my strongest opponents, allowing me to defeat them all in one go. How considerate. Look up at them, Harry. Look at the fear in their eyes."

Harry unwillingly looked up. It was almost as if he was under an imperious curse, and his eyes were immediately met by those of the headmaster, his blue eyes not full of fear, but of all the love and worry that the old man had within him.

"How do you think I should kill them, Harry? All at once or one at a time?"

Harry felt a shudder run through his body, wincing as he began to cough again.

“I shall let you decide. After all, you were their saviour. You were the one who was supposed to save them. And after all your futile attempts, you have still failed.”

Harry could hear Voldemort sigh loudly and falsely.

“If you had only joined up with me when you still had the chance, we could have been invincible, my boy. But now you will die with the knowledge that you will always hold a place in my thoughts; as the boy who helped me rise to power.”

Harry let his eyes escape those of Dumbledore’s and allowed them rise to the intimidating shadow of the Hogwarts building against the thundery sky, his eyes being drawn to a small flicker of light that shone from one of the tall towers. As he stared at the light, a wave of warmth passed through his body, and hope once more swelled in his chest.

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Hermione watched as Harry’s gaze wandered over them, horror filling her heart at the dead look she had seen in their dark shadows and Voldemort’s words still running through her mind.

“C’mon, Harry.” Ron was muttering beside her, both hands pressed tightly against the invisible barrier as if he was willing himself to fall through to help his friend. “Snap out of it. You can beat him.”

Harry’s head then rose further to look at the building towering up behind them, and the brown haired prefect watched as the brightness that she was so used to begin to reawaken itself in her friend’s features as if he was emerging from a long sleep.

“What’s he looking at?” she asked, pressing herself as close to the protective wall as possible and looking up to see if she could see what Harry was focusing on.

“Gryffindor tower.” Dumbledore answered. “The younger students there were talking about lighting a beacon, letting us know that they are behind us all the way.”

“They also said something about a box of filibuster fireworks if we won.” Tonks added morosely from where she stood with one hand supportively on Remus' shoulder.

Leo got to his feet and stood next to Hermione, his eyes not leaving his pupil's face. “This beacon, is it a lantern?”

“No, I believe they were simply going to use one of the torches from the hallway.” Dumbledore said, curious as to the Master's actions. “Why?”

“Fire!” Leo's breath started coming in fearful gasps as he stared at the kneeling boy in front of him. Harry turned his head and their gazes met, and the look in his eyes confirming the Master's greatest fear. “The prophecy has even told us the method of death. Voldemort will mark him as an equal... Why didn't I see it before?”

“See what?”

“Pyro is going to combine the elements!”

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Harry felt a surge of burning determination run through his body as he tore his eyes from the flickering light in the Gryffindor tower and sought to meet Leo's. He saw by the man's expression that his tutor had already worked out what he was planning to do, and knew that the wizard would be able to spur the others into protecting themselves, as the shield surrounding the castle would not hold up to the powers that Harry was planning to unleash.

“Well, Harry. What is it to be?” Voldemort's voice hissed from behind him. The Dark Wizard had brought himself closer to where Harry was still kneeling on the ground, but still stood a standard duelling distance away. “Short and sweet? Or long and painful?”

Harry gritted his teeth and hunched his shoulders slightly, ignoring the urge to cough up more blood. "I'm not. Dead. Yet." He hissed, blood shooting through his teeth to add to the pool already on the floor.

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Leo watched with mounting apprehension as a bright golden glow suddenly fired up in Harry's green eyes, and the boy pushed himself up from the floor, his hand reaching up to the Gryffindor window to summon the flame towards him. In the same movement Harry spun on one knee, coming to his feet and swinging the fireball towards Voldemort. The ball landed at the Dark Wizard's feet, and Leo watched as the ball of flames grew into a tall column in front of Voldemort, stretching into the stormy sky and swirling angrily.

"What's going on?" The group turned to see Harry's Marcello friends running up towards them, some of them nursing various wounds from the duels they had been involved with.

"What does he think he's doing?" Brogan asked them, his deep voice travelling easily through the rain as they stared in horror at the size and the sudden burst of heat that came off the tower before them.

"The four elements all have one thing in common." Leo replied in a monotone, almost as if he was reading from a textbook. "Lightning has a charge strong enough it can travel through the air. It uses the earth to ground itself, and in the instant it strikes it creates a temperature so hot it is able to combine Hydrogen and Oxygen to create water. But unlike normal lightning, if a wizard brings the elements together then it has the addition of that wizard's power. Its the most powerful thing a elemental wizard can produce."

He sighed as he recalled the words that the Doyen had once told Harry. "No one has managed to combine the elements and survive." He repeated. "As the elemental takes control of the elements, the power often becomes too great and it overwhelms him. If he loses consciousness then that power is unleashed and will likely kill all in

the near vicinity. And all this time the clue was in the scar on his head.”

Ron shuddered as his eyes took in the size of the fire tower in front of him and he remembered the small ball of flame that Harry normally practised with.

“We have to set up wards to protect the building and all those inside.” Leo continued watching as a splash erupted from the middle of the lake, rising high into the air before it formed another column and swirled its way to Voldemort’s side like a tornado. “Pi won’t be able to keep up this wall once he has to control all four elements. It’s up to us.”

Dumbledore nodded, taking one last look through the rain at the teenage boy standing with his back to them, his robes swirling around him. He took a mental snapshot, recording as many details as possible before turning and shouting out orders to those around him to take control and strengthen the invisible barrier that ran around the school. His calls were echoed down the line by the lesser confused of the Hogwarts fighters who had found themselves transported to the shelter of the castle walls, and people began to move with new purpose, conjuring various shields and protective charms.

As the headmaster took control of the situation Leo felt a soft hand on his arm and looked down to see Hermione standing there. “But Harry’s strong.” She said, her tone of voice indicated that she completely believed in that fact. “He’ll make it, won’t he?”

Leo glanced at his students who were standing against the invisible wall next to him and shook his head.

“He’s never attempted anything like this.” He said quietly. “I’ve never seen him with anything more than two elements at any one time, and certainly not on this scale. The only thing we can do is make sure that his efforts are not wasted.” He turned his back on the elemental and looked up at the tall building that stood black against the sky. “We have to protect the school and those inside.”

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Voldemort's smile faded as he saw the boy with glowing golden eyes stand in front of him, and doubt crossed his mind as Harry's hand jerked forward for a third time, his robes flapping wildly as the air element formed behind the Dark Wizard, kicking up the sods of grass and dirt as it reached high into the air.

"What do you think you are doing, Potter?" he hissed, trying to intimidate the boy in front of him at the same time as trying to stem the flow of panic he was feeling in his chest. "You've lost boy. Can't you see that? You can never win!" But as he spoke he felt the ground begin to shake, and watched as Harry's eyes glowed brighter than ever, concentration embedded deep into the boy's face as he fought to control the element he had most trouble with.

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Many of those trying to set up wards to protect the school fell to the floor as the ground tremor increased, and loud screams could be heard from inside the school as those who weren't able to see what was going on began to panic.

"Look!" Todd shouted from the floor, pointing his wand to Voldemort's left side. "He's managed all four elements!"

A tower of spinning earth reached high above the Dark Lord, and the ground reduced itself from violent shakes to mere trembles as if the tower had been a release of a great pressure.

The onlookers continued to watch as the four elements began to spin around one another, picking up speed as they revolved around the Dark Wizard. Those behind the protective shields began to back into the shelter of the castle walls, fearful of the power that radiated off the elements.

The scream of the wind increased as the elements spun faster, and they towered higher up into the sky where the dark clouds looked as if they were reaching down to meet them. The noise seemed to reach

fever pitch as Harry started walking towards Voldemort, his rain-soaked robes swirling violently in the wind that raced across the grounds, flattening many of the smaller trees and causing those behind the protective shields to crouch low and cover their heads the best they could.

“Shields up!” the onlookers heard Dumbledore’s voice clearly, even over the howling wind. “Protect yourselves!” Soon there were walls of shields appearing, many creating wards that would cover those in charge of the main barrier Harry had originally created as well as protecting those who were injured.

Leo knelt down, pulling the shocked Remus behind his own shield as the man stared blankly at the display of raw power in front of them. After a quick check to make sure Hermione, Ron and the others were well protected he returned his attention to the swirling elements.

And waited.

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Harry walked towards the spinning columns, a strange calmness descending over his mind as he stopped barely out of reach from the raging elements. Between the four columns he caught glimpses of the Dark Lord, fear in his red eyes as he stared out at Harry and screamed something that could not be heard over the noise of the wind.

Harry allowed a smile to cross his lips, knowing what he had to do to stop the evil that had been part of the wizarding world for so long now. He had a brief moment of doubt as he sensed his friends behind him, staring at his back and willing him to turn around, walk away and stay safe. But before he allowed himself to hesitate too long, he pulled back his right arm, letting out a loud cry as he let it fly into the wall of swirling elements in front of him.

The air around him exploded and a bright light descended from the sky down the middle of the tall spire he had created. He felt his arm burn as the lightning passed through his hand, and his body was flung back away from the wall as the loud clap that followed burst his

eardrums, the pressure strong enough to instantly envelop him in a blackness that brought with it a strongly desired feeling of relief.

Chapter 50: Out of the ashes.

Remus held Harry's left hand lightly, staring silently into the pale face that looked so peaceful in death.

It had been just over twenty-four hours since the battle had ended with the tremendous lightning bolt that had been initiated by Harry. The occupants of the castle had been well protected from the blast of energy from the elemental-induced phenomenon, though some walls of the castle had experienced minor structural damage, and Hagrid's hut and the Quidditch pitch would need some serious repair.

Those who had been close to Harry had been the first to break through the wards that had been wrapped around the castle, and had rushed to the smouldering crater where Harry and Voldemort had last been seen. There had been no remains of Voldemort, though Harry's broken body was easily distinguishable from the well sodden earth.

Many of those who had rushed to see if Harry had survived had gagged or even vomited at the smell of the burnt flesh that had once been Harry's right arm. Those who were fit enough had formed a corridor of weeping or numb people as they watched Dumbledore quickly transfered Harry's body onto a stretcher and hover the boy into the castle, a black blanket covering the body from public view as they made their way to the Medical Wing followed closely by his friends.

Madame Pomfrey had immediately placed the body in a private room at the back of the ward, letting those who had known Harry the best a few minutes before shooing them out to have the other Healers deal with their injuries whilst she cleaned up the body as best she could.

Now Remus sat alone, in deep reflection about the times he had spent in Hogwarts with Harry's father and Sirius. He wished that he could change the way things had turned out, but deep down he knew that Harry's death was meant to be. Not that the thought of Harry dying for the sake of others made his loss any easier.

Behind him, he heard the door to the private room open and close softly, and soon after he felt a soft hand fall onto his shoulder.

"You still here, Remus?" Leo asked softly. "It'll do you no good to stay cooped up in here for too long you know."

Remus nodded. "I know" he sighed lifting Harry's left hand and gently rubbing the back of the waxy fingers with his own. "But he has done so much for me. He never asked for this. I just feel that I owe him something, that's all."

Leo nodded. "I understand. He gave me a lot, too." Remus looked up questioningly. "He and Kat were a constant reminder to me that there was more to life than Marcello and it's ideals. That there is a better way to live." He shook his head sadly. "Pyro would have had some good plans for that school, had he been given the chance to see them through."

"You're going back then?"

Leo shrugged, perching himself on the edge of Harry's bed and smoothing its sheets. "Maybe someday." He said. "The knowledge that is taught there cannot be allowed to die out. And where else is there for gifted young wizards to disappear to?"

Remus smiled slightly and gently placed Harry's hand back on the bed as he heard the door open and shut once more.

"Albus." Leo acknowledged with a nod. Remus looked around to see a flash of red pass him before his gaze met that of the Hogwarts' headmaster.

"How's the leg?" Remus asked as the aged wizard walked towards him with a slight limp, his weight resting heavily on a carved cane.

"Healing nicely," was Dumbledore's reply. "Poppy is still trying to make me bed bound, but I feel this limp is going to be around for a while."

As he said this, Remus noticed the headmaster's eyes fall onto the bed and its occupant. He nodded, understanding that Dumbledore

also owed Harry a lot, and keeping the limp was a reminder of a boy no one wanted to forget.

A low whistle from Fawkes broke the silence that followed as he settled on the bedpost at the foot of Harry's bed. The whistle was quickly repeated, and developed into a sorrow filled song that swelled the hearts of the three wizards in the room with warmth, yet also made them painfully aware of the emptiness they all felt.

Remus felt his eyes fill with tears as he looked at the phoenix. The song was beautiful, yet seemed not to come from the fiery red bird that stood at the end of the bed, its wings widespread and his head cocked to one side with a look in his black eyes resembling... joy?

"What's going on?" Remus tried to locate the origins of the phoenix song and found his eyes being drawn to the prone figure of Harry.

"Harry?"

Remus felt Leo push past him in an attempt to reach the boy's side, but was denied his goal by a sudden blast of heat that engulfed the room. The three wizards raised their arms in an attempt to protect their faces, and the phoenix standing at the end of the bed rose into the air, his wings widespread as he released a whistle of what could only be described as pure elation.

"Harry!" Remus peered through his arms to see the once peaceful body of the teenager arching against the mattress, his pale face flushed red and reflecting the pain his convulsing muscles were causing him.

The ex-werewolf made an attempt to get to the bedside, but was also prevented from doing so by the intensity of the heat radiating from Harry's body.

Before much time had passed, Harry's body snapped into an upright position, his emerald eyes open wide and his body letting in it's first lungful of air for over a day before collapsing back onto the bed in a coughing fit.

"Kat." Remus watched, paralysed by shock as Harry's right hand reached towards the door. "Sirius. Don't leave me."

"Harry!" Remus knelt in front of the choking boy and took hold of the hand that reached out into the room. "Harry, it's okay. Everything is going to be fine."

"Remus?" Harry coughed again and Remus felt helpless as he watched another wave of pain etch itself onto the boy's face. The boy that had previously seemed so strong against the Dark Lord now looked into his father's friend's eyes, tears flowing freely down his young face. "It hurts." He cried weakly. "It hurts so much."

Remus automatically perched himself onto the edge of the bed, pulling the sobbing figure against his chest and gently patting his head. "Shh, Harry. It's over. Everything will be fine. I promise. Just get some sleep now."

Harry slowly calmed down to the sound of Remus' words, falling into an uneasy sleep against Remus' chest, still hiccupping slightly.

The ex-werewolf looked at the hand that he had clasped firmly in his own and his eyes opened wide as he realised all the burns from where the lightning had hit the arm had disappeared. Not one scar was left to indicate the hardships the boy had been through over the past year.

He looked up at Dumbledore and Leo, who were standing in shock and staring at the figure Remus held in his arms. "What just happened?" He asked quietly, still rocking Harry's body slightly.

"I believe Mister Potter has just discovered his inner-phoenix." Dumbledore said, sounding as if he hardly believed his own words. "I think Harry has just experienced his first burning day."

There was a burst of song from the end of the bed where Fawkes had resumed his perch, and Remus felt the boy in his arms relax even more. His once jagged breathing became more regular, though his lungs still contained a small rasping sound that indicated their lack of use.

"But it looked so painful." He said.

"What do you expect?" Remus looked up to see a bright sparkle in Leo's eyes, almost of as if the Marcello Master was about to break into song and dance around the room. "It was his first burning. Fawkes here has probably had centuries to get used to the process. A process which, I might add, is likely to have been a lot easier if he had been in his phoenix form."

Remus felt a strange pressure building in his chest and he looked down at Harry's now sleeping form. With each breath the boy took a small strand of hair that fell across his face moved, indicating the life that once more coursed through the boy's body.

"He's alive!" The words felt good as they left his lips and he looked up to see Dumbledore and Leo hugging each other tightly. A tear fell down his face, but he let it fall unhindered, and it didn't stop the grin that spread across his face. "He's really alive!"

Chapter 51: Reawakening.

"Any sign?"

"He hasn't moved for over a day.... Poppy has been in though. She thinks he's sleeping..."

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"What's that noise?"

"I think Albus has told the Weasley's that he is still alive."

"But he hasn't woken up yet."

"It's been nearly four days since his burning, I guess Dumbledore thought they deserved to know."

"What about your boys?"

"I thought I'd wait for Dumbledore to make the first announcement. I'll tell them this evening, I'm sure they'll come and visit tomorrow..."

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"He's opened his eyes!"

"Todd, close the blinds, the light is too bright for him!"

"Hey there, Harry."

"How are you feeling?"

"No hope. I think he's drifting again..."

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"Harry!"

"Ron, keep your voice down!"

"He's awake, his eyes opened!"

"He's done that before. Now quiet! He needs his rest!"

"Look, your voice scared him off! He's gone back to sleep."

"Doesn't he look weird without his scar!"

"You thinking about starting up his fan club again, Ginny?"

"Pyro had a fan club?"

"Of course! He is the boy-who-lived-twice after all. The original club was founded by my darling little sister..."

"Ron! Shut up."

"If you are so intent on being in here, then I must insist you limit your talking to whispers, the poor boy has a lot of healing to do."

"Sorry, Madame Pomfrey..."

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"Hello Harry. Are you with us this time?"

Harry blinked blearily as the outline of his friends became more prominent against the whiteness of the ceiling. He made an effort to talk, mumbling something that was incoherent and meaningless to everyone in the room, including himself.

"What was that you said, Pi?"

"Was that even English? It sounded like Parseltongue to me."

"He's going again..."

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"You need to drink this, Potter."

Harry frowned at the voice of his old potions' professor and felt a hand gently support his neck as he obediently drank a potion. He took a deep breath, clearing his head as much as he could before attempting to speak.

"Is he...?"

He wasn't sure if what he said made any sense, but Snape seemed to understand, as he gave the boy a genuine smile and nodded.

"He's gone, Potter. For good this time. We owe you a lot..."

Harry let his words fade out as relief warmed his body, and he once again drifted away into the darkness.

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Remus Lupin watched as Harry turned himself over in his sleep. Both of his hands were hanging off the bed, with his right arm pinned under his body as he sighed deeply and buried his head face-first into his soft feather pillows.

The last of the Marauders grinned at the boy's movements; happy to see the sixteen year old behaving like a normal teenage boy should, and silently thanked Merlin for allowing Harry the chance to act his age.

"Has he woken up again?" A voice from the door asked, and Remus let out a laugh as Harry's face jerked up and away from the pillow at the noise. He looked towards the ex-werewolf, his eyes smiling blearily through the hair that covered his face as he recognised the man sitting before him.

"He's just coming round now." Remus told Leo, then lowered his head so that he was on a level with Harry. "How you feeling, kid?"

Harry smiled a bit more and nodded slightly, before turning his head back into the pillows to stifle a yawn.

“You’re certainly looking a lot brighter today.” Leo observed, leaning over Remus’ shoulder. “Might even get some coherent speech out of you before too long.”

Harry gave him a writhing look and pushed against the bed to flip himself back over. The movement left him slightly breathless as he croaked out an “I’m fine!”

Remus immediately handed over a glass of water, which Harry sipped at gratefully after pushing himself to his elbows.

“I can see that.” Leo said as Harry’s sleepy hands spilt most of the liquid down his bare chest.

Harry swore under his breath before handing the glass back and falling back against the pillows with a sigh. “How long?” he asked weakly.

“Since you woke up, or since the attack?” Remus asked.

Harry shrugged, and the two men gave him a quick summary of what had happened since the day of the tournament.

“Burning day?” Harry slurred sleepily, trying to force his eyes to stay open. Leo and Remus grinned at each other, realising that Harry’s mind still wasn’t up to speed and he had missed most of the conversation.

“Go back to sleep, Pyro.” Leo said gently. “We’ll explain more when you are up to it.”

Harry nodded in agreement, and yawned again before closing his eyes and drifting away into a peaceful sleep.

.....

Dumbledore walked into the private room that ran off from the Hogwarts infirmary to see Ron and Hermione talking quite cheerfully.

As he neared the bed he noticed Harry's emerald eyes shining tiredly from his pale face, a smile showing his gratefulness to his friends for sitting by his side.

"Professor!" Hermione stopped mid explanation of the finer details of how doctors operated on their patients in muggle hospitals, and looked up greet the headmaster with a smile at Ron's eager interruption.

"Good evening Ron, Hermione." He nodded at his two students and made his way around to the opposite side of Harry's bed. "I see you are finally able to stay awake, Harry. How are you feeling today?"

"Tired." Harry admitted weakly. "But I think my brain is functioning at a more regular pace now."

Ron laughed. "I'd say. It was quite worrying hearing your disjointed attempts at conversation two days ago."

Harry nodded. "It'll only get better." He said confidently, though Dumbledore could sense the effort in Harry's voice as he struggled to produce coherent speech.

"I was wondering if you were feeling up to a little chat." Dumbledore said to the patient. "Well, it'll probably be me doing most of the talking, but I can come back in a couple of days if you don't feel up to it."

Harry shook his head. "I should be okay." He said with a sigh and a looked pointedly at his friends. Hermione gave a quick nod in understanding and took Ron's hand.

"C'mon, you" she said. "Lets go and find Remus. I believe he said something about wanting to see us earlier."

"He did?" Ron asked, looking confused as Hermione nodded. "Oh! Well, I guess we'll see you later then, Harry."

Harry nodded and weakly raised a hand off the bed to wave at them as they left, not having enough energy to raise the rest of his arm off

the sheets. He turned to Dumbledore. "What can I do for you, Professor?"

The Hogwarts' headmaster smiled slightly and took a seat next to the bed. "I believe you've heard about your defeat of Voldemort a week ago?" Harry nodded slightly, wondering what was coming next. "I was hoping you'd be able to tell me how much you remember of that night?"

Harry focused on his hands, his eyes darting from side to side as he searched through his memories. Finally he shook his head slightly. "I remember the Quidditch matches well." He said in a quiet voice. He paused for a moment and then continued. "And I remember the alert going up, getting people into the castle. Then the Dance with Malfoy..." he shook his head and lowered his eyes. "I know it sounds sick but...it felt amazing. Natural. Like it was supposed to be, and that I didn't have any control over what I was doing." He looked up at Dumbledore. "I swear that if I had control of my actions then I would have stopped myself from delivering that final blow. But I really didn't have a choice. The sword just took over."

Dumbledore nodded in understanding. "I don't believe Draco holds anything against you about that." He said. "In fact, I believe he helped you soon after. Do you remember anything else?"

Harry sighed and shook his head. "I remember a lot of pain, and darkness. Snape came in yesterday and partially explained to me about Avery using his "talents" again. He also told me that it was Draco who stopped him. But I guess from then on the pain took over my memories, everything else is pretty much a blur."

"A lot of people owe you their lives for what you did that night." Dumbledore said softly. "You removed a great evil from our world and for that everyone is thankful." He paused slightly. "But I must say that I probably owe you on a more personal level. I thank you for saving my life, and wish to make you aware of the wizard's debt I now owe you."

Harry watched in tired amazement as Dumbledore lifted his left hand off the cool bed sheets and held it to his forehead, then to his lips

where Harry could feel his white bristles tickling the skin as he placed a light kiss there and then returned it back to the bed.

“I – I don’t understand.” Harry murmured, moved by the old man’s actions.

“I’m a foolish old man, Harry.” Dumbledore said. “I have had my share of battles in the past, and although I still have my strength I am afraid to say that I am losing control of my wits. I made a mistake in that battle that certainly would have taken my life, and risked the lives of many others had you not been there.” He took a deep breath before continuing. “I unforgivably turned my back on the most powerful dark wizard of this time. Not entirely intentional, I can assure you. But I let myself get distracted.”

“...Do with me?” Harry murmured, and Dumbledore could see that Harry’s strength was beginning to leave him again.

“Voldemort sent an unforgivable at me.” He said, cutting to the chase and telling the tale as quickly and as bluntly as possible before he lost Harry to unconsciousness once more. “And like another phoenix I know, you jumped in its path, absorbing its energy and morphing its purpose to apparate me to my desk in my office and to form a strong protective barrier in front of the school.”

The headmaster watched as a shadow of pain crossed through the boy’s facial features, causing lines to appear on his young forehead and his usually bright eyes to turn a dark, haunted green. “Because of that.” Dumbledore continued. “I am forever in your debt. However, you are a strong young man, and I am sure that once you regain your strength you will hardly need me to save you at any time. So, if I can repay the debt in any other way then do not hesitate to ask.”

He watched as Harry absently nodded, his eyes lightly closed and his facial expressions betraying his thoughts as they travelled back to the events of that night. It still amazed the headmaster to see how open the boy’s emotions were, and yet, when the time called for it, he knew Harry could take great strength from those emotions in order to protect those he cared about.

After a long pause, through which Dumbledore was unsure of whether or not Harry had drifted off to sleep, he heard the boy speak in a quiet and weary voice. "I do not ask anything of you, sir. You have helped me a lot during my time at Hogwarts and to me that is enough. However, I know of the duty that binds you, and I hope that we can work something out when I am a little more... with it."

The headmaster smiled. "Of course, Harry." He said. "There is no rush."

He hesitated, trying to judge the boy's strength before continuing. It wasn't until Harry cracked open one eye and sent his silence a questioning gaze that he felt able to go on. "Before I let you rest, however, there is one thing I'd like you to think over during the next couple of days."

Harry's other eye opened in an attempt to focus his attention on the old man. "There are a lot of people who still think you are dead, Harry. We have not told anyone other than those who have regularly visited that you are still alive. No memorial or burial service has been performed. In fact, it has not been publicly announced that you are dead, or were dead, even though you were technically so for over a day."

Dumbledore looked openly at the young saviour. "I know you have never liked the attention you have been given due to your status as the boy-who-lived. And I'd like to make you aware of the possibility of keeping your recovery a secret. You can take on a new identity and we can organise a proper memorial service in your honour..."

"But?" Harry, his mind growing more sluggish as he tired, and could hardly conceive the possibilities of the life he could have with a new identity.

"But there is always the possibility of someone finding out. Especially since many of your close friends already know about your recovery, and the fact that you owe a lot to Marcello. You have the potential and are expected to become Doyen, and your sword will not

allow itself to be passed onto any other until you are either dead or beaten. It is an obvious identification mark.”

“So you suggest?” Harry closed his eyes as the world began to spin, it had been a long time since he had concentrated for this length of time, and he could feel reality beginning to slip.

Dumbledore took in a deep breath. “As I said before, it has not been officially stated that you were dead. I guess we all wished, deep down, that it wasn’t possible. I propose a small media gathering, telling people that you are alive and slowly recovering.”

“More publicity.” Harry muttered with a sigh, and turned his face away.

“But not one that can follow you around.” Harry frowned a little and Dumbledore went on to explain. “I suggest that once you are well enough, you take a holiday; A break from our world for a while to help you find your feet. Relax. Have fun and explore the world.” He smiled at the wistful expression on Harry’s face. “Go to the places where the media can’t follow. And when you return, take over your rightful place at Marcello. No one knows about its location, and you can run the school your own way. If you don’t accept the Doyen position, then the knowledge of the more ancient forms of magic that you learn there will likely be lost forever. And when you want to go on trips or visit friends, I’m sure you have enough knowledge of magic to be able to disguise yourself effectively.”

Harry tiredly explored the edge of his bed sheet with his fingers. He looked paler than he had before, and dark rings were standing out prominently around his eyes.

“May I think about it for a while?” He asked quietly.

“Of course.” Dumbledore replied. “I just felt you needed to know your options in good time before you had to make a decision.”

Harry nodded, his eyes closing again. "I appreciate it, thank you." His head sank deeper into his pillow and he turned slightly onto his side as Dumbledore stood up to leave.

"Thank you, Harry." He said quietly as he straightened the sheets before walking around the bed to the door, pausing with his hand on the doorknob when he heard his voice being called quietly.

"Professor? What are you going to do now it's all over?"

Dumbledore thought about Harry's slurred question before replying. "I'm getting old, Harry." He said. "I'm going to start to think about retirement. It'll take me a few years to find someone suitable to take over Hogwarts and train them. After that I look forward to conducting some research. Maybe even write a few books...." He looked over to the bed to see Harry's peaceful face and his chest rising and falling as he slept. "Sleep tight, Little Phoenix." Dumbledore said with a smile, then pushed open the door and walked out.

Chapter 52: To honour a hero.

"So, are you going to the celebrations tomorrow, Harry?" Ron asked. The dark haired wizard shrugged and pulled himself back onto the bed until he was leant against the pillows. He had agreed to let the wizarding world know that he was still alive, and the small gathering that Dumbledore had initially proposed had turned into a large celebration to officially announce that the darkest wizard of the age was now dead, and that Harry had survived the battle.

"Might pay a visit." He said. "I'll probably wait until it gets busy, then go down and blend in with the crowd. Chances are that I won't be there very long before I have to pop back here for a nap, anyhow."

Ginny smiled in sympathy. "But you are getting better all the time." She pointed out. "You've actually stayed a wake a good number of hours today." Harry flashed her a quick smile.

"Just feels a bit strange." He said. "I kinda got used to the feel of all that power, you know? I feel so weak and helpless at the moment. And I'm so bored of sleeping."

"It won't last long." Sheridan said wryly. "In a blink of an eye you'll be running those gruelling training sessions again. It's a shame really, I've become really used to the break."

Hermione frowned slightly. "But if you are still unable to perform magic for any length of time, how are you going to disguise yourself tomorrow? People will recognise you."

Harry shrugged again. "The whole point of the celebrations is to let people know that Voldemort is gone and that I'm still alive." He said. "People will see me eventually as I refuse to go into hiding. I'm a free man now, and once they find out that the real thing is nothing without a prophecy hanging over my head, they'll soon divert their interests elsewhere."

Hermione and Ginny glanced at each other, both doubtful as to the truth in Harry's words. They were pretty sure that the media would

find some sort of interest in everything Harry did; it was the way they worked.

"Besides," Harry continued. "I'll have to return to Marcello at some point. And you lot hardly look like you've just lost your best pal. People will soon get suspicious."

"Would never notice you'd gone." Todd said with a grin, and Harry narrowed his eyes at him in a mock glare, before stifling a yawn with the back of his hand.

"Uh-oh." George said with a smile. "Sleeping beauty is drifting again."

"I'm okay for a few more minutes." Harry assured them and the group fell into a companionable silence.

"So, no big entrance this time then?" Horus asked, and Harry shook his head, catching the meaningful look that passed between the twins from the corner of his eye.

"And whatever you two are planning, you can just unplan it." Harry told them. "I don't want any big surprises, and I don't want to see any fireworks flashing my name, or anything of the sort for that matter. I just want to be part of the crowd tomorrow, okay?"

Fred and George gave him identical innocent looks. "As if we would do something like that to you." Fred exclaimed.

"You're practically family!" George added.

"Though the firework idea sounds pretty cool..." Sheridan pointed out with a mischievous glint in his eye.

"Not that he'll need any such introductions with the size of the statue they've got out there." Ron said, then his eyes opened wide with shock when he realised what he had just said.

"Statue?" Harry asked warily, and George hit his brother over the head.

"Smart-mouth" he muttered.

"Statue?" Harry repeated. "What statue?"

Ginny sighed. "Fudge thought it would be a great idea to build a statue in memory of the "boy-who-lived-and-saved-the-world"." She said.

"Its his way of pretending he was behind you from the start." Hermione added.

"And where is this statue?" Harry asked.

"Outside the front entrance, over looking the lake." Brandon said.

"They're going to unveil it at the celebrations tomorrow." Brogan added.

"Dad thinks Fudge is trying to show off to the whole of the wizarding world that you came from humble old Hogwarts." George added.

Harry nodded slightly, chewing on his bottom lip as he contemplated what he had just heard. After a few moments of silence he pushed himself off the bed, pulled his cloak over his head and headed for the door.

"Where are you going, Pi?" Horus called.

"To grab a look before everyone else gets here." He said. "I think I have a right to see how stupid he has made me look before everyone else gets to."

"But Pomfrey will have a fit." Hermione said, following the others as they rushed after him. "You were practically asleep just then."

"Being tired doesn't really seem that important anymore." Harry said over his shoulder, leading the others down a corridor.

"But it's dark." Hermione tried again. "You'd see it a lot better in the morning."

"But it might be too late to do something if it is as awful as I suspect." Harry said and Hermione rolled her eyes and gave a little cry of frustration as they headed down the stairs to the next floor.

Within a few minutes they were standing on the front steps of the school, staring in disbelief at the back of the covered statue.

"Wow." Ginny said. "It's bigger than I imagined."

"It must be nearly twenty foot high!" Sheridan exclaimed.

Hermione glanced at Harry in time to see an emotionless expression on his face before he headed down the steps and strode towards it.

Within seconds he had pulled the sheet from the statue and was looking up at the carved figure before him with a painful expression on his face.

The others came to join him, and Ginny couldn't help but let out a snort of laughter. Within moments Fred and George followed her example, and soon all of them were laughing loudly. Even Harry had a grin on his face and was chuckling.

"I'm sorry, Harry." Brogan said, wiping his eyes. "But that is awful."

"Hey, I didn't make it." Harry said, staring at disbelief at the representation of himself standing on the stone plinth. The sculptor had taken all his most prominent features and had exaggerated them, creating the tall portrayal of a boy in a Hogwarts uniform, wand in hand and with ridiculously crazy hair, thick black-rimmed glasses and a scar that stretched across the whole of his forehead.

"They must've had used that photo of you from the tri-wizard tournament." Ron said breathlessly. "No offence mate, but we can't leave you looking like that."

"Well, I don't see what we can do." Brandon said. "It's not like we can transfigure something that size into something better."

"Maybe we could dress it up a bit?" George suggested.

"A hat, and a Gryffindor scarf?" Fred continued, nodding slightly.

"Maybe a real cloak...? What do you think Harry?" George looked to his friend who had a thoughtful expression on his face.

As they watched, a smile began to play at his lips, and he turned to Horus. "I have an idea." He said, glancing up at the comical face staring down at him. "And it's going to involve some drastic changes."

Hermione shook her head. "I don't think I like the sound of that, Harry." She said. "You should be resting. What if something happens?"

Harry smiled, balancing his weight equally on both feet. "It won't," he said. "I might get a bit tired, but nothing that a good night's sleep wouldn't fix."

"Bearing in mind that you have been sleeping pretty solidly for two weeks already." Ginny said.

"Ten days." Harry correctly absently as he looked up at the effigy and tried to picture what it would be like. "Well, here goes nothing." He said, and transformed into his phoenix form.

Hermione rushed forward, but was held back by Conway and Brogan as the phoenix flew into the air, hovering at a point in front of the statue and starting to sing.

The song became louder, and though it sent warmth through those that were below, they were still forced to cover their ears with their hands. Before long, another phoenix voice joined Harry's, and Fawkes swooped down to take a place opposite the already hovering phoenix. Their voices combined in strange harmonies, and the others felt strong waves of power vibrate through their bodies as the statue began to morph into another shape.

When the phoenix song eventually faded away, the fire-birds fluttered slowly to the ground, landing next to each other and both looking

pretty tired. Harry once more transformed, sitting with his legs stretched out in front of him, and resting his weight on his hands. He looked up at his work of art and nodded. "Now, it is a memorial." He said with a smile, before letting himself fall back onto the green grass with his eyes closed.

"Harry!" Ginny and Hermione ran forward, but Horus pushed them aside and gently pressed his fingers to Harry's pulse, before quickly examining the felled phoenix.

"They're okay." He assured them. "My guess is that they are both just sleeping. We can levitate him back to the medic wing, if you guys make sure that this thing gets covered again."

"Sure," George said, then pointed at the front of the statue. "But just look at it!"

Horus joined the others where they were standing stunned at the transformed statue, and had to admit that Harry's work had been impressive.

Before them, on top of a stone plinth that raised the base of the statue to be level with their eyes, stood the four symbols of the Hogwarts houses. A powerful lion stood with his head lowered, a look of determination in its eyes and its right front paw raised as if it were taking a step forward. Below the upraised paw, a badger stood confidently, a soft look on its face. Standing upon the Lion's back stood a magnificent eagle, its wings outstretched as if it were in the process of taking off. And on the left, balancing tall on its tail, stood a cobra, its magnificent hood stretched wide and its mouth open to reveal its fangs, but Harry had made its eyes give the impression of knowing and solidarity, rather than the crazed evil that had been so prominent in Voldemort's snake-like eyes.

Ron pointed at the solid base, where some words had been subscribed:

It does not to dwell on dreams and forget to live, but it is equally foolish to ignore the past – never forget.

The group nodded in agreement.

"Captures the essence of Hogwarts perfectly." Hermione said in a low voice.

"It is amazing" Sheridan agreed. "I never realised he had an artistic side."

"But it still isn't right." Brogan said softly, not wanting to admit it aloud.

"Were there any records made of all those that have died during Voldemort's reign?" Todd asked after another short silence. "If this is going to be a memorial, and Harry wants us never to forget, then I think we should have everyone's names inscribed on the side."

Hermione began to smile. "I'm sure there are some records in the library." She said.

"And there was a large list in the Daily Prophet the other week." Ginny added.

Brandon nodded. "I think Harry would appreciate it if we did that for him." He said with a smile.

"Sounds perfect." Conway agreed.

"You guys get started." Horus said, walking over to Harry. He placed his hand on the boy's chest and gently levitated him up into the air. "I'll take sleeping beauty here back to bed, and come down to give you a hand."

Chapter 53: Celebrations.

Harry was walking peacefully along the woodland path that led down to the lake at Marcello. In the distance, he could hear laughter and the sound of a splash as something landed in the water. The day was warm and sunny, and he wasn't surprised to walk into the clearing to find his friends leaning over the water to retrieve the ball without getting wet.

Harry raised his hand, and with the tiniest amounts of concentration created a soft breeze that blew the ball back to shore.

"Harry!" Conway exclaimed, and his other friends surrounded him, welcoming him with hugs and slaps on the back.

He noticed that there were a lot of Hogwarts students in the clearing as well, and he greeted Hermione, Ginny and Ron with small hugs before shaking hands with the other male members of the DA and sharing the occasional peck on the cheek with the girls.

"Harry!"

The boy turned to greet Remus, who had not left his side whilst he had been recuperating in bed at Hogwarts. The two shared a warm shake of the hands, and a quick one-armed hug before Remus turned and allowed Harry to meet the other adults that had been congregating around a table filled with drinks and food.

He shared easy banter with the older Weasleys, laughing as Molly Weasley gave him a kiss on both cheeks before pulling him into a motherly hug. He eagerly returned the bear hug, grateful that the whole of the Weasley family had escaped the battle unscathed.

Moody, Tonks and the other members of the Order were next in queue for pats on the back and the occasional word of praise before Dumbledore walked up to him. Neither said a word, but exchanged a look that expressed their feelings of relief and respect as they shook hands.

Dumbledore stood aside to reveal Leo standing there. The Marcello Master walked up to Harry, and placed a hand on his shoulder, a strange smile on his face. When Harry questioned this with a look, Leo moved his attention to something behind the boy, and gently exerted some pressure on the boy's chest to get him to turn around.

Harry followed his directions, and his heart stopped in disbelief at what he saw.

Standing in the middle of his circle of friends was Kat. She was wearing her usual loose trousers with a vest-top. Her hair fell in long waves around her shoulders, framing her delicate face, and she had a small white lily tucked behind one ear.

Harry stood in shock as she walked up to him. He was vaguely aware of his male friends snickering behind their hands, and the girls were openly weeping with happiness at their reunion.

"How...?" Harry started to ask, but was stopped as Kat raised her hand and placed cool fingers against his lips.

"This isn't real, Pi." she said. "You're dreaming."

Harry shook his head in disbelief, turning his head into her touch as he was flooded with emotions that made the situation so real.

"No..." he murmured, pressing his lips against the palm of her hand.

"You're sleeping, Pyro." she said again. "This is all a dream."

Harry opened his eyes and stared deeply into her dark eyes, trying to read her emotions. "I've never experienced a dream like this." he said softly, but as he spoke he became aware that everyone else had suddenly disappeared, leaving the two of them alone in the clearing.

He looked back at Kat, taking a tentative step back. He had not had pleasant experiences of other people appearing in visions, and briefly wondered if Voldemort had not died and had found some way to get into Harry's mind without the need for a linking scar.

"Everyone deserves a good dream, now and then, even you." she said with a smile. "I've just come to relay a message, from Sirius, and your parents."

She idly ran a hand up Harry's arm just like she used to do, and Harry couldn't help but shiver as he recalled the more intimate moments they had shared together.

"They just wanted you to know that they are all so proud of you. Not just for getting rid of Voldemort, but for finding the strength to keep going." She looked up at him.

Harry shook his head. "I don't want to keep going." he said. "I want to be with you."

Kat smiled at him sadly. "You can't do that, Pi." she told him. "You once told me that you weren't sure who you were. That your life was being run by people's expectations and the prophecy. Though you now have the chance to be yourself, to do things your own way, your life will still not be your own."

Harry frowned. "What do you mean?" he asked.

Kat looked to her right, where the Sword of Kudos was leaning against the rock that jutted out over the water. "You have to be Doyen." she said. "You can change the way things are run there for the better. And though it would be easy to lose a fight to someone to surrender that responsibility, you also have the elements to think about. You have to find an apprentice to train before you can move on, Pi. There aren't many elementals left in the world, and you can't just let the magic die..."

"So I see you in two-hundred years then, do I?" Harry asked, his eyes filling with unshed tears.

Kat smiled and nodded. "If you're lucky." she said with a small laugh. Then her expression darkened. "Your mother wasn't entirely sure what she did that evening to help you, Pi." she said. "All she remembered was that she so determined to protect you, to make sure that you didn't die. Dumbledore was right in saying that the magic

was transformed to do the opposite of what the curse originally intended, but there is no way of knowing the extent of your Phoenix powers..."

Harry stared at her in shock, blinking his eyes once, but not taking the effort to wipe away the two streams of tears that ran down his cheeks. "The burning..." he said, and Kat nodded, weeping freely.

"It may just be a result of the prophecy that was made." she said hopefully. "You know, the bit that implied that only one of you was to die? I guess we won't find out until it is time. But I want you to know that you should live your life as well as you can, don't be hung up on memories of the past, okay?"

Harry shook his head. "I'm not going to forget you, Kat!" he said fiercely.

"I know." Kat replied softly. "But two-hundred years is a very long time to be alone, Pyro. I'll understand if you don't go actively looking for new friends, just don't push anyone aside if they try to get to know you better, okay? Promise me?"

Harry stared at her silently for some time, taking in the way she looked, then smiled a half-smile. "And I thought things would be easy without Voldemort around."

Kat smiled in return. "Now whatever would make you think such a thing?" she joked. "But seriously, life will be easier. You have a great life ahead of you. Now go live it."

She pulled Harry into a warm embrace. "I love you." he whispered into her hair.

Kat stood back and nodded, tears falling freely once more. "I know." she whispered back, before letting go of his hand and walking into the trees, taking one moment to look back at him and smile wistfully before disappearing into their shadows.

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Harry opened his eyes to find Remus kneeling over his bed and staring into his face worriedly. As he smiled at the older man in recognition, a wave of relief washed over the ex-werewolf's face and he backed away a little to let Harry sit up.

"Oh, thank Merlin!" Remus exclaimed. "I was just thinking about going downstairs to find Pomfrey for a moment there. What time did the others finally let you get to sleep last night?" he asked.

Harry frowned in sleepy confusion. "Sorry?"

"It took me forever to wake you up." Remus explained. "I thought that maybe it was due to a late night?"

Harry shook his head slightly, remembering the magic he had performed to transfigure the statue. "No, I was having a strange dream." he said hollowly. The details of his dream were rapidly disappearing, taking with them the memory of Kat standing in front of him, her cool hand against his face.

Remus sat on the edge of the bed, looking concerned. "A bad dream?" he asked.

Harry answered negatively. "It just seemed so real, you know?"

Remus nodded. "Look, Harry, if you ever want to talk about anything, you know I'll be there. I may not be able to do much to help you sort through what happened, and probably wouldn't be the best person to give advice, but I know you've been through a lot and I'm always happy to listen."

Harry smiled at him. "I know, Moony." he said, shocking the werewolf with his use of the man's nickname. "And just knowing you are there is more than enough for me."

Remus returned the smile, before giving Harry a quick embrace.

"Do you feel up to coming downstairs now?" he asked.

"What time is it?"

"Mid-afternoon." Remus replied. "But the others insisted that you be allowed to sleep for as long as possible before you came down. I guess they didn't want you to tire yourself out before the big celebrations start later this evening."

"The big unveiling ceremony, right?" Harry asked.

Remus nodded with a sheepish grin. "I guess they told you about that, then?"

"Ron kinda let it slip." Harry said. "Give me a while to have a shower and feel more presentable, and I'll meet you down there."

"Sounds good." Remus said, before reaching over to pick something off of the floor that Harry couldn't see from where he was lying on the bed. "A present from Ginny and Hermione." he explained as he placed a large box on the bed.

Harry looked at him questioningly, but Remus just indicated that he should open the box.

Harry pulled away the string that held the sides together, and pulled out a set of dark red robes that shimmered with black and gold around the cuffs and around the hem. "Wow." he said, noting that the colours matched those of his Phoenix form. "Where did they get these?"

"Madame Malkin's this morning." Remus explained. "They felt that you needed something "proper" to wear to the presentations, and so dragged Conway down to the town this morning to buy these for you."

"They needed an escort?" Harry asked.

Remus shook his head. "He was the nearest match to your stature, though a little larger around the chest. I think they had him standing up on that stool for nearly two hours this morning trying on different robes until they found one that they both liked."

"Remind me to thank him." Harry laughed.

Remus laughed with him. "I think it was worth it." he said. "Put them on after your shower, and I'll meet you downstairs. Don't be long."

"I won't." Harry assured him, and swung his legs out of bed as Remus left the room.

Not long after, Harry silently snuck out of a seldom used side-door of the castle, choosing to slip unnoticed into the crowds rather than announcing his arrival by walking through the main entrance. Though he felt reasonably well rested, he knew that it wouldn't be long before his energy would start to ebb, and was thankful he hadn't gone out the front door when he noticed that a platform had been built level with the steps partway down the staircase. If he had exited through the front door he would have had to walk onto the stage, making a big spectacle of himself in the process.

He looked over the large crowd. Though Dumbledore had started off inviting only the Order members and a few select individuals from the Ministry, the word had soon spread, and not much could be done to stop all those that had been involved in the battle inviting their families for the large party.

He heard the clashing of swords, and saw a number of Marcello students demonstrating duels in a small cordoned off area near the banks of the lake. He noticed Brogan and Conway using sticks to teach some younger children how to mock-duel safely, whilst others stood wide-eyed in amazement as a couple of students were using their animagus forms, wandless magic, and swords to duel.

A small explosion further to his right redirected Harry's attention to a large crowd of predominantly younger people. He noticed a bright banner flying high over a temporary stall, and smiled when he recognised the twins advertising and selling their products loudly.

He started towards them, assuming that he would find some of his friends down there, when he was halted by a loud "Hey!"

He turned, smiling as he saw the familiar figure of Neville Longbottom walking towards him.

"Hi, Neville." he said, holding out his hand in anticipation of a friendly greeting.

"Who are you?" Neville asked coldly, and in that instance Harry noticed the wand the Gryffindor held in his hand.

Harry glanced down at himself in confusion. He had left his hair down to let it dry quicker after his shower, and was wearing proper wizarding robes compared to the battle robes people had become accustomed to seeing him wear. Even with the absence of his characteristic scar on his forehead, or the absence of any scars at all for that matter, Harry didn't think he had changed that much.

"It's me." he said. "Harry!"

Neville shook his head angrily, raising his wand threateningly. "Who do you think you are?" he said, stepping forward. "Harry is dead. He gave his life for the protection of the Wizarding world, and here you are, tainting his memory with your cheap impressions!"

Harry shook his head. "But it is really me, Neville." he said weakly, wondering why Dumbledore hadn't told the crowd that he was still alive yet. "I survived!"

Neville shook his head. "I will not have you mocking my friend like that! Harry was a good man, and didn't deserve this." He jabbed his wand at Harry, shouting "Respirato Impedimenta" and sending the saviour of the wizarding world flying back onto the floor, clutching at his chest in an attempt to catch his breath.

"Neville!"

Harry was grateful to hear his friends coming up behind him, and felt some hands pull him into a more upright position, pushing him to lean over his knees to relieve the strain on his chest as he started to heave some rasping breaths.

"What do you think you're doing?" Ron asked incredulously. "Harry is not well. You shouldn't be throwing hexes at him!"

Neville stared in shock to where Brogan and Hermione were kneeling on either side of the panting boy. "Harry's alive?" he asked in disbelief.

"Yes. No thanks to you." Todd said coldly.

"But...how?"

"He was never dead." Dumbledore said, coming up behind the group, and talking clearly so that the crowds around them could hear his words clearly. "It was never confirmed that he was, and in reality he was recuperating in a private room in the Hospital Ward under the care of Madame Pomfrey."

"I'm sorry, Neville." Harry said breathlessly, as he allowed himself to be hauled to his feet. "I would've had it so that you and the others were told sooner. But I was really ill, and I've only really been able to receive visitors for a few days."

"But how did you survive?" someone from the growing crowd asked loudly to be heard over the casual chatter that was going on.

"I guess it just wasn't my time." Harry said, thinking back to his dream conversation with Kat, and wondering when it would finally be "his time".

"Harry was very critical for a worryingly long time." Dumbledore announced, allowing Harry to finish catching his breath. "We were unsure whether or not he was going to survive, which is why we felt that we shouldn't make his survival public knowledge until now. After Harry gave himself so selflessly in order to remove the threat of Voldemort from our lives we felt that we owed him the time to let himself recuperate, until he felt he was strong enough to present himself to you."

"What about your scar?" Cho Chang asked, indicating towards her forehead as she pushed herself to the front of the crowd to catch a glimpse of the boy-who-lived-yet-again.

"It just started fading when I started to wake up." Harry said, sticking to the story that had created when he was bed-bound. "We think that it's the final proof that Voldemort is gone for good."

A loud shout rippled through the crowd, and people started laughing and clapping to express their happiness, and those standing further back started wandering forward to find out what was going on.

Neville walked up to Harry, his eyes wide with horror with what he had done. "Oh, Harry. I'm so sorry... I never meant..."

Harry smiled and held up his hand. "It's okay, Neville." he said. "Kinda reminds me of the time you stood up to us in the first year, when you caught Hermione, Ron and myself sneaking out of the common room late at night."

Neville looked down at his feet. "It seems that I always end up fighting for the wrong reasons."

"No you don't." Hermione said. "You fight the right fights, you just tend to fight them at the wrong times."

Harry nodded. "You have great strength, Neville." he said, mimicking Dumbledore's words from a couple of weeks before. "And that is a great asset. And if you do start supporting the wrong fights again, well, you have all of us here to help you out."

"Just don't go near Hermione." Sheridan said in a stage whisper. "She'll try and get you supporting this vomit-thing..."

Neville looked at him blankly.

"SPEW." Ron enlightened him quietly, and Neville's face immediately softened in recognition.

"So you did survive, then." A sneering voice from the edge of the crowd interrupted. Harry and the others turned to see Draco Malfoy standing there, his robes partially dishevelled as if he had pushed his way through the rapidly growing crowd.

He walked up to Harry with a carefully controlled expression on his face. "And an elemental as well! Seems to me that you didn't reveal everything in that corridor, Potter."

Harry hesitated before saying anything, not sure how to interpret the boy's words without having any sort of information from the boy's facial features, and not knowing how to start apologising for killing his father.

It turned out that he didn't have to say anything, as Draco held out his hand in a gesture of friendship. "I owe you, Potter," he said. "You've released me from my father's clutches, and I'm am grateful."

Harry frowned slightly, hesitantly taking the boy's hand and shaking it. "Draco, I'm so sorry. It was the sword... I just couldn't stop it..."

To his surprise, Malfoy's face broke into a grin, shocking most of the Hogwarts' students that were standing around. "I mean it, Potter," he said. "I owe you. As soon as I graduate from here, I inherit all of the Malfoy estates. I'm going to be one of the richest wizards in the world!"

"With the arrogant attitude to match." Ron muttered coldly.

Malfoy glanced at him. "Well, I doubt I'll be seeing you around, Weasley," he retorted. "I doubt you'll be seen in any of the social circles I'll be frequenting."

"As if I'd want to hang around with a bunch of wizard's with heads as big as yours," he said. "The room will be so full of hot air, it'll be worse than sitting in front of Norbert after Hagrid gave him that funny looking stew."

"Better than sitting behind him, though." Todd said with a smile.

Harry smiled as well, letting go of Malfoy's hand and rolling his eyes. Some things never changed, and he was sure that Hogwarts would never get over the rivalry between Gryffindor and Slytherin.

He bit back a yawn, straining his jaw as he fought to hide it from the others. He jumped slightly as he felt a hand on his shoulder, and turned to see Dumbledore standing there, a knowing smile on his face. "Let's get you up to the podium," he said, indicating the staging in front of the school that was floodlit in the increasing darkness. "The sooner the memorial is uncovered, the sooner the twin's can start their magnificent display and direct the attention away from yourself and your friends."

Harry nodded, and accepted the supporting slaps on the shoulders from his male friends, and the slight squeeze of the hand and the quick hugs from Hermione and Ginny as he followed Dumbledore through the crowd that magically parted before them.

He saw Fudge standing at the foot of the stairs leading onto the podium with Percy Weasley standing beside him, both trying to give the impression of authority and as the crowd's attention was drawn to the stage by the approaching figures of Harry and Dumbledore.

"Harry!" the Minister said with false warmth, stepping forward with arms outstretched to greet the boy who had vanquished Voldemort.

Harry stood stock still as the Minister patted his shoulder, feeling quite repulsed by the Minister's attentions.

"We are all so proud of you, Harry." the Minister said, stepping back a little doubtfully when Harry didn't move under his embrace. "We always knew you would have it in you to save the day, and supported you all the way!"

Harry quirked an eyebrow at the Minister's words. "Really?" he said slowly with a voice full of contempt. "I don't remember seeing you at the battle, Minister." he said, and snapped his eyes up to meet those meeting him over Fudge's shoulder. "Nor you, Percy. Strange, seeing the rest of your family were brave enough to show up and actively support our efforts against Voldemort."

Anger flashed through Fudge's eyes, and he stepped up closer to Harry. "Don't you dare try and undermine me, boy." he said. "I am the Minister! And you will not make any such implications in the future."

Do you understand me? No one can imply that I did nothing less than what I thought was best for the community."

"But what you thought was best for the community, and what is best for the community, are two very different things, Minister. Especially when the money pooling in your pocket is what motivates your decisions."

Harry took a step closer to Fudge, finding himself glaring slightly downwards at the now nervous looking man. "You nearly made a grave mistake by not acknowledging Voldemort's comeback, Minister. And don't even think to assume that I am in anyway intimidated by you. I may not be anywhere near full strength yet, but I am the-Boy-Who-Lived, and I have killed the darkest Wizard of this age. Who do you think the people will support if I chose to reveal the truth behind who you really are?"

He glanced up and down the man's body and shook his head. "Clean up your act," he said, with a look of disgust causing one corner of his lip to rise. "And just be thankful that I haven't got the energy to denounce you just yet. If you can prove that you are worthy of being a leader of the Wizarding community, then I may just forget about the way you have spread rumours to the press about my sanity and my loyalty. Think about it." And with that, he pushed past the Minister and started up the steps with Dumbledore on his heels.

Near the top he found Remus standing next to Leo who was in full battle-robcs, with his sword across his back. Beside them stood Mad-Eye Moody, his magical eye staring oddly out the side of his face at the crowds in front of the podium, and Shacklbolt, who had his wand drawn and held ready to be used in his hand.

"What are you four doing here?" Harry asked, confused.

"Security." Leo replied, stepping forward and brushing the tops of Harry's robes to straighten them out after his fall. "A few known Death Eaters escaped the grounds moments before you enveloped the immediate area with lightning."

Harry glanced to his right over the grounds, but was unable to see the blackened grass on the floor due to number of people milling around, and had not thought to look the night before when his attention had been taken by the memorial.

"We don't think you'll have anything to worry about." Shacklebolt assured him. "Most of the largest names were either killed or apprehended on the field. A few known individuals have not been accounted for yet. We can only hope that they were dealt with by the defences in the forest, but we're here just in case they want to get revenge on you."

Harry snorted slightly, "You did a fine job when Neville hit me with a variation of the Impedimenta down there." he said with a small smile to let them know he was joking.

"Well, most would exit the castle through its main door, Potter." Moody retorted.

Harry flashed him a quick grin. "But I thought you were one to promote "constant vigilance"." he said. "I figured I would scout out the area first, before announcing my presence to however many people are here tonight."

Moody frowned at him, but Harry was sure that the man was trying to hide a smile beneath all his scars.

"Are you going to be okay doing this, Harry?" Remus asked. "You are looking pretty pale."

Harry nodded, and looked at Dumbledore who had taken a back seat through all Harry's conversations. "As long as we make it quick." he said wearily. "I'm getting pretty tired."

Dumbledore nodded immediately. "Let us get started then." he said, indicating with one, largely robed arm to the top of the podium.

Harry walked up the steps, suddenly feeling very nervous as a hush fell like a wave over the crowd at his appearance, starting from the

rows of witches and wizards standing just in front of the stage, and sweeping back to the shores of the lake.

Harry was relieved to see that his closest friends were the ones standing at the front, just in front of the memorial that towered behind them. But their encouraging smiles did nothing to dampen the butterflies that were swooping and flapping wildly in his stomach.

Then, breaking through the oppressive silence, a single clap was heard, repeating itself after a second.

Harry quickly searched the first rows for the lone applauder, and his eyes met with Professor Snape, who gave him a nod before clapping a third time.

His friends soon caught on, and started applauding more enthusiastically, with a few cheers and whoops as more people started to clap around them. Harry's eyes moved across the crowd, following the noise as if it were something foreign to him.

He looked back to where Leo stood with Dumbledore and the others, looking to him for some help understanding what was going on, but found him clapping as hard as the rest, Dumbledore applauding enthusiastically next to him.

He looked back at the crowd, this time making eye contact with some of the faces that he recognised. His breath caught in his chest, and tears started well in his eyes as he realised the crowd was cheering for him, and there was no indication of them relenting any time soon.

As his eyes roamed over the dark mass of people, the odd flame or Lumos charm lighting faces further back in the crowd, Harry recalled the faces of those he knew wouldn't be present to celebrate with the others that evening. A wave of tired-induced guilt coursed through him suddenly, and he made to turn and flee from the attention of the crowd, suddenly feeling very undeserving of their applause. But his escape was barred by Dumbledore, who calmly placed a hand on his shoulder and turned him back to face the crowd.

"You deserve this, Pyro." Leo said softly, coming up next to his other shoulder with Remus and watching the pale boy carefully as another tear fell down his panicked face. "For bringing them together. For showing them what it is to unite and work together."

Harry started shaking his head. "But so many people..." he broke off with a sob, and turned to look at the fellow Master in the eye. "Kat..."

Leo shook his head sadly, and Remus pulled Harry into a short, but heartfelt embrace. "Not everyone could be saved, Pyro, you know that. Their deaths couldn't be helped."

Remus looked over Harry's shoulder at Dumbledore, who nodded and held up both of his hands and the crowd slowly fell silent.

Harry turned back to the front of the stage, sniffing and trying to rub the tears out of his red eyes.

"My friends!" Dumbledore started, after casting a Sonorous charm on himself. "We are all here today to celebrate new freedoms..." another cheer went through the crowd, drowning out the rest of his words.

The headmaster smiled and patiently waited for the noise to die away again. "And we are also here to express our gratitude to Harry Potter, who was the one to take the final stand against Voldemort...."

Again, the crowd let out excited cheers, this one including a number of whistles stamping of feet on the compact earth. Harry shook his head slightly, and Remus could see the exhausted looking boy bite his bottom lip hard in order to contain his emotions.

The crowd took longer to pacify this time, but when they finally did, Dumbledore continued in a more sober tone.

"But, most importantly, we are here to pay our respects to those who are not able to celebrate with us today. There is not one person here who can say that they haven't been affected by Voldemort's actions, either through a direct relationship or simply by recognising a name.

Because of this, we are here this evening to reveal a Memorial for all those loved ones that have been lost to us."

He indicated the tall podium with one arm, placing his other hand on Harry's shoulder. He smiled softly at the boy beside him and gave him a nod when the boy looked up at him. "If you would, Harry?" he asked.

Harry looked at the tall statue, still hidden underneath the large cover. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, concentrating on the slight breeze as he held up one hand to the memorial.

The crowd let out gasps of amazement as any naked flame near them suddenly flared up in the breeze and was extinguished; leaving the crowd lit only by the occasional Lumos spell. Suddenly, a number of small torches that surrounded the statue ignited, and the wind picked up enough to pull the cover from the memorial, revealing the representatives of the four houses standing magnificently in the torchlight.

The crowd stared in awe of the memorial, and Fudge started running up the steps, shouting angrily that someone had vandalised his statue. His progress was immediately checked by Moody and Shackbolt, and his shouts were drowned by the loud applause and excited chatter of the crowd as they discussed various features of the new memorial.

On the podium, Harry let his hand drop and opened his eyes, trying hard to fight the dizziness that made the world spin around him. But he failed and swooned slightly, immediately feeling Dumbledore and Remus grip his arms just above his elbows firmly to prevent him falling.

"You really should learn that there is no need for dramatics." Leo said with humour in his voice.

Harry smiled sleepily and shrugged, staring through half closed eyes at his work as the headmaster and his friend started leading him off the stage.

Chapter 65: An end.

Harry lay flat on his back in the darkness, staring up at the infinite, black sky and identifying the occasional constellation as he let his eyes wander absently.

He had spent most of the evening sitting quietly as his friends had played games and celebrated with all the other witches and wizards. Before long, though, he had felt too tired for the excited atmosphere and had made his excuses, choosing to go for a quiet stroll around the lake to sort through his thoughts before heading to bed.

He eventually found himself in the clearing that he had adopted for his private practise, as it reminded him so much of the clearing he had used back at Marcello. He wondered briefly if the similarity between the two had been the reason why he had ended up apparating there rather than Hogwarts.

Before thinking too long on the subject, he concluded that it had been Fate that had taken him to where the Doyen was waiting to teach him about the elementals, and had laid down on the ground, staring up at the sky until he heard distant conversation and crashing through the undergrowth as a large number of people headed towards him.

He didn't move as his friends broke through the trees into the clearing, all looking relieved to see him lying there.

"We thought we would find you here." Todd said with a smile as they crossed the clearing.

"After visiting the Harry's room in the hospital wing, and the Gryffindor Common Room before scouting the crowds near the castle." Ginny replied, returning Todd's glare with a smile.

"You all right?" Brandon asked, taking a seat on the ground near Harry.

Harry didn't respond from where he was laid on the bank, just rolled his head on the ground until his eyes focused on the castle and watching the twin's fireworks as they burst brightly and full of colour.

"Not really." He finally admitted. "I'm exhausted. I can feel myself getting stronger, but it's going to take such a long time to get how I was."

He rolled his head the other way and looked at his friends. "I noticed what you guys did with the names on the base of the memorial. Thanks. It means a lot to me."

"It means a lot to us too, mate." Ron said. "Besides, it's so much better than your gorgeous face gracing us every morning." He tensed and ducked his head slightly, expecting Harry to send an elemental or hex his way. When it didn't come he looked up to see his friend grinning tiredly at him.

"I'll get you some other time, when I have the energy." Harry said tiredly, and stared back out over the lake.

"What are you thinking of, Harry?" Hermione asked after a short silence.

"The future," Harry said after a short pause. "And what I should do now."

"Have you got any ideas?"

Harry shrugged, and looked back at them. "What are you guys planning to do?" he asked.

"Well, we'll have to stay on here for another year, Ginny for two." Hermione said. "After that, I'm probably going to go on for some further education, become a professor or something."

"Ron?"

"I'm thinking about working for the Ministry." Ron replied. "Dad should be able to get me a job there somewhere. I was thinking about going for an Auror apprenticeship, but I don't think I'll get the grades. I suppose it wouldn't hurt to apply for the position though."

"I'll probably go into a Healing profession." Ginny continued. "I'm doing pretty well at Potions now that Snape isn't being as much of a git as he used to be."

"And you lot?" Harry asked his Marcello friends.

They looked at one another, communicating silently before Horus spoke up. "Well, I'll be heading back to Marcello. I'm still a Master, and I'm quite looking forward improving my instructor skills and teaching new boys how to fight."

"And the rest of us are going to go back to finish our education." Conway said. "I guess things will go back to the way they were before any of this ever happened."

"Maybe not exactly the same." Brogan said, "Kat and Orson will no longer be there." and the clearing fell silent as they realised the implication of his words.

"I'll be going back." Harry said suddenly, breaking through the silence.

"Pyro...?" Horus started.

"I have to take my position as Doyen. It is expected of me."

"You don't have to live up to people's expectations any more." Hermione said. "You can do whatever you want."

"Oh, I'm not going to do it straight away." Harry assured her. "I plan to go travelling first. Learn about magic in different cultures; there must be hundreds of different magical methods out there and I only know a couple. Then I plan to come back. And I plan to change Marcello."

"Change, how?" Brandon asked.

"I want it to become a specialist school." Harry said. "For Wizards and Witches alike. I want it to offer more academic courses, focusing more on magic rather than duelling the whole time. I still want to keep its location secret, though I am going to make sure that people know it exists, so that any student who goes there can hold their head up

proudly with the knowledge that they're one of the chosen few that are allowed access to Marcello."

"And how are you proposing to go about those changes?" Horus asked.

"Slowly." Harry immediately replied. "I'll start by focusing more on the art of wandless magic, then we can introduce other courses when people are settled on that idea. In fact, you lot can start that process off whilst I go travelling. When I get back, we can then work on introducing girls into the system, and bring in some other professors for the specialist subjects."

"That sounds like it's going to take years." Ron said with a grimace.

Harry nodded, staring back up at the stars. "I'm not planning on going anywhere." he said sadly. "In fact, if I ever have the misfortune of experiencing another burning day, I expect I'm going to be around a lot longer than any of you can imagine."

The others stared at him in silence as they replayed his words in their minds, and realising their implications.

"You know," Harry said after a small sigh. "Voldemort was intent on achieving immortality. He didn't want to die, and had tried so many methods of keeping himself alive that he turned himself into more of an entity than a human being. Yet, when you know that there is the possibility that you can never die... it scares me. I can imagine life becoming very torturous if you have to be alive for centuries. Phoenixes may be equipped mentally to deal with living for eternity, but I know I'm not. I'm sixteen years old, and I'm already looking forward to the day I die, knowing that it may be two-hundred years or more away."

"You aren't going to go and try anything silly to test this out, are you?" Ginny asked nervously.

Harry laughed once. "The idea has crossed my mind." He admitted. "But then I think that, on the off chance that I'm not immortal, I've wasted this second chance at life. No. I'm just going to have to live

with the possibility, and do as much as I can in this lifetime. No unnecessary risks. No assumptions."

"Sounds like a wise plan." Brogan said, and silence fell over the group as more fireworks flew up into the air over the castle.

After a while, Brandon sat up slightly, turning on one elbow to look at his friends. "Anyone up for heading back to the castle for some hot drinks?" he asked, and was returned with some positive noises from the other teenagers.

"Sounds like a great plan," Hermione said, disentangling herself from Ron's arms to sit up. "Harry?"

The group looked to where the saviour of the wizarding world laid flat on his back, his eyes closed and his chest rising and falling deeply and steadily.

Horus started to laugh quietly at the sleeping boy, and the others joined in.

"You think we should wake him?" Ginny asked, leaning over and staring intently at the boy's face in the darkness.

"Nah." Sheridan said. "He looks content."

The others agreed as Harry had a small smile gracing his lips, his expression indicating one of a peacefulness that the others had not seen on his face for a long time.

"Let's let him sleep on." Hermione suggested. "We can take him back later when the fireworks are over."

"Sounds good." Todd said, falling back onto the ground with a small thump so that he didn't have to strain his neck to watch the fireworks.

The group then fell into a friendly silence. They admired the twins work with the fireworks as they drifted in their own thoughts, content with the knowledge that there were no longer any shadows

threatening their futures, and that they had their whole of the rest of their lives stretching freely and undefined before them.

-1Hi folks,

Just thought I would let you all know that I've started writing again, and have posted the first few chapters of my version of HP7. Would love to know what all my original readers think. Read and Review. Hear from you all soon!!!

Kit. xx